

Details

Sonja Snacken

Function: Vice rector International Relations

Title: Prof. dr.

Academic position

Professor of criminology

Short biography

Place and date of birth: Gent, November 13, 1955

Education: Master in law (1978); PhD in criminology (1985)

Scientific career in brief

Started as a researcher in criminology (Scientific Council, VUB) and teaching assistant in criminology, criminal law and criminal procedure (VUB). Since 1991 full-time professor in criminology, penology and sociology of law. Granted a Research Fellowship at VUB (2006-2016). Part-time professor at UGent (1999-2009); Research Fellow at the Straus Institute for the Advanced Study of Law and Justice, School of Law, New York University (2010-2011); Collaborateur-membre of the Centre International de Criminologie Comparée, Université de Montréal (since 2010).

Awards: Belgian Francqui Chair, Université Catholique de Louvain (2008-2009); FWO Ernest-John Solvay Prize for Scientific Excellence in Language, Culture and Social Sciences (2010); European Criminology Award for lifetime contribution as a European criminologist, European Society of Criminology (2015); nominated for the International Stockholm Prize for Criminology (2010).

Turning points

1978: discovering criminology as a law student; the chance to start a PhD in criminology with Prof. Eliaerts. 1982: first international research stay in Sweden, thanks to a fellowship from the Council of Europe. Since 1994: acting as an expert for the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture of the Council of Europe; inspecting places of detention in the 47 member states; uncovering practices of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment; getting to know the legacy of the Soviet prison regime in Central and Eastern European countries. Then, as member (2001-2006) and president (2006-2012) of the Council for Penological Cooperation of the Council of Europe, developing human rights standards relating to punishment in the 47 member states. The sabbatical leave, granted by the VUB in 2001-2002, allowed me to integrate my empirical social scientist approach with human rights as an academic discipline.

Hobby/passion: music, dance, people; my family and friends.

What do you see as the biggest challenges in your new function?

In general, reinforcing the international reputation of the VUB. We perform excellent research and offer great education. VUB researchers and research groups are involved in many international networks, which are however insufficiently known at the institutional level to foster structural

synergies. I also hope that we can reinforce our position in Brussels as the capital of Europe and the European institutions.

As far as education is concerned, we must further stimulate the international mobility of students and staff. We must tackle financial limitations restricting outgoing mobility for certain students and stimulate “internationalization @home”. I spent my first years as a VUB-student on the Solbosch campus of the ULB; my friends came from China, Japan, Korea, Turkey, Nigeria and Pakistan – an unforgettable experience.

Moreover, as a humanistic university based on free inquiry, we have a specific identity and responsibility. VUB scholars have played a leading role in complex bio-ethical issues such as abortion and euthanasia, both at national and international level. We owe to ourselves and to society to reflect on the role we can play in important societal developments, such as a multicultural society, the refugee crisis, the increasing dualisation, the impact of technology, etc.

Where would you like to be in four years' time?

That we as VUB have progressed with regard to all these challenges – and hopefully without worsening my gastric ulcer.

What is your vision for the future of the university?

The university has three essential tasks: research, education, service to the community. But academics must also take responsibilities in policy-making within research groups, faculties, the university. Producing quality in all these domains is time- and energy-consuming; we all work far more than a normal working week. This shouldn't be a problem as long as you're driven by passion for your work. But this requires a balance between those different fields *and* with your private life. There was one moment in my academic life when I was about to quit - the balance was gone, the burn-out loomed. A sabbatical leave granted by the VUB saved me. As an organisation, we have to guarantee such balance on a structural basis. Administrative support is also important in that respect.

Especially with regard to research, quality is increasingly at risk by being taken over by quantity. The concept of “slow science” was unknown when I started – there was no other science. Society is entitled to a return on investment, and I am convinced of the value of project research and peer reviewed publications. But quality requires time and reflection. One of the most famous scholars in the sociology of punishment, Prof. David Garland from New York University, was granted a Doctor honoris causa at VUB. Every 10 years he publishes a book that is again and again a milestone in our discipline. But it is the result of 10 years of research. When Prof. Isabelle Stengers from ULB was awarded the 2010 FNRS Ernest Solvay Prize for Excellence in the Social Sciences, she reflected that she could never have conformed to the current ‘publish or perish’ pressure – we should reflect on this.

Finally, what is your motto?

Private: “Always look on the bright side of life”

Professional: “Take the causes you fight for seriously, not yourself”