European Animal Research Association

Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium

Annual Evaluation Report of 2023

Contents

Figures

1. Executive Summary

The Belgian declaration to be more transparent about animal research in 2016 was the foundation for the Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium, signed in 2020. Since 2019, the biomedical community in Belgium has been committed to adopting a clearer, more open, and transparent approach to the use of animals in research.

The Transparency Agreement (TA) is a proposal by the European Animal Research Association (EARA) in collaboration with the Belgian Council for Laboratory Animal Science (BCLAS), and the Belgian scientific community. It aims to improve the information available to the public and the media on the use of animals in biomedical research in Belgium.

The implementation of the Agreement is based on four commitments, the first three of which refer to the promotion and improvement of internal and external communications by the signatory institutions, and the last of which refers to the sharing of experiences and results.

This is the second evaluation report of the Transparency Agreement in Belgium, which aims to highlight how the signatory institutions have implemented the agreed commitments and identify the areas where more guidance and support are needed.

It is prepared based on a survey completed by all the 17 institutions involved in the initiative and reviews the progress made on openness (see also *Annex III - List of signatories to the Agreement 2020*).

Some questions in the 2023 survey were changed compared to the 2022 version, with the aim of getting clearer answers. Also, some additional questions were added to provide insight into the extent to which institutions experience that increased transparency has led to more negative exposure and publicity (e.g., more targeted by external activist groups) to also highlight potential disadvantages of more transparency.

Some of the results to be highlighted from the feedback on the implementation of the Agreement include:

- The survey revealed that virtually all but three of the institutions 82% (14/17)[1] have a publicly accessible statement on the institution's website, which explains the institution's involvement with animal research. The three institutions that do not have a statement are working hard to provide one on their respective website.
- Most of the respondents or 82% (14/17), reported newsletters and internal publications or communications in their institutions, or talks and presentations about the use of animals in research (76%, 13/17) to promote internal communication.
- Five institutions (29%, 5/17) provided interviews or long-form pieces where the use of animals is covered.
- Around two thirds of the signatories (65%, 11/17) participated in activities organised by EARA or BCLAS and/or arranged Open Days (41%, 7/17).

Several institutions applied additional good communication practices which could serve as examples to other signatories to further increase transparency.

[1] % Of the respondents (number of respondents/ 17 institutions)

- Seven (41%) institutions encourage/allow/train scientists to respond to questions about animal research (both internally and externally). Six (35%) respondents have a specific mailbox for such questions which is forwarded to specific spokesperson(s).
- Just under half (41%, 7/17) of the signatories provide media training for staff who wish to engage with the media on animal research.
- Four (24%) of the signatories participated in, or organised meetings and events, to facilitate partnerships and ensure openness around animal research.
- The most used social media platform is LinkedIn (29%, 5/17), followed by Twitter (24%, 4/17). Just three institutions use Facebook and one institution reported using Instagram.

Some areas where signatory institutions could improve their communication practices were identified:

- Less than a third of signatories (18%) provide images of the animals used in their research on their website, while just two (12%) institutions reported to have recorded video footage of research animals or procedures and footage of the animal facilities on their website.

Overall, the results show that institutions are taking steps towards a commitment to creating opportunities for the public to access information on the use of animals in research. There is still potential to provide a higher level of transparency. For instance, some of the respondents indicated that more assistance with communication should be provided to organisations that are not directly affiliated with a university or company. In this way, more people can be reached. This communication should also emphasise the scientific progress made by using animals, including concrete examples (such as treatment against cancer, paediatric indications, diagnostics tools, ...). This would have more impact than technical information that is usually too complex for the public to understand. EARA and BCLAS could help to reach out to those organisations and motivate them to join the Transparency Agreement.

The form and speed of implementation of all commitments varies, of course, from institution to institution, and all of them have started from different levels of openness and transparency. Although this is not a conditioning factor, one aspect highlighted in the survey is the need for meetings in person and online with other signatories to exchange experiences, expertise, and good practices. This report therefore also includes some suggestions for improving the implementation of the agreement between the signatories.

1.1. Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium

The Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium is an initiative by EARA, in collaboration with the Belgian scientific community, to promote information to the public on the use of animals in biomedical research. In April 2016, 22 Belgian organisations involved with life science research signed a Declaration on Openness on Animal Research, co-ordinated by the European Animal Research Association (EARA) and the Belgian Council for Laboratory Animal Science (BCLAS). Following this Declaration, steps were taken to develop it into the current Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium, signed in December 2019 by 17 institutions (see *Annex III - List of signatories to the Agreement 2020*).

This initiative is based on previous examples from around Europe such as the Dutch code of transparency on animal testing in 2008, the Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the

UK launched in 2014; the Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Spain, launched in 2016, and the Portuguese Agreement launched in 2018. There are now eight such agreements in Europe (also France, Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland) and two outside Europe, in Australia and in New Zealand.

The Agreement comprises four Commitments:

- **Commitment 1:**
  We will be clear about when, how, and why we use animals in research.
- **Commitment 2**:
  We will enhance our communications with the media and the public about our research in Belgium using animals.
- **Commitment 3:**
  We will be proactive in providing opportunities for the public to find out about research using animals and the regulations that govern it.
- **Commitment 4:**
  We will report on progress annually and share our experiences.

1.2. About this Report

This is the second evaluation report of the Transparency Agreement in Belgium, which aims to highlight how the signatory institutions have implemented the agreed commitments and identify the areas where more guidance and support are needed.

The information and results presented are based on the responses of the signatories to an online evaluation survey. The survey was sent to all the 17 institutions involved in this initiative and the responses were collected between May and August 2023; all 17 institutions involved in the Transparency Agreement responded to the survey. This report covers the year 2022.

By completing the survey, the respondents **fulfilled the Fourth Commitment** of the Transparency Agreement, whereby the institutions undertake to report on their progress in compliance with the agreement and to share their experiences.

1.3. Signatories of the Agreement in Belgium

The institutions that are respondents to the Transparency Agreement are universities (53%, 9/17), commercial (bio)pharmaceutical companies (29%, 5/17) and research institutes (18%, 3/17) *(see Figure 1)*.

Signatories who carry out animal experimentation on their premises correspond to 94% (16/17), while 6% (1/17) provide only support for animal research.

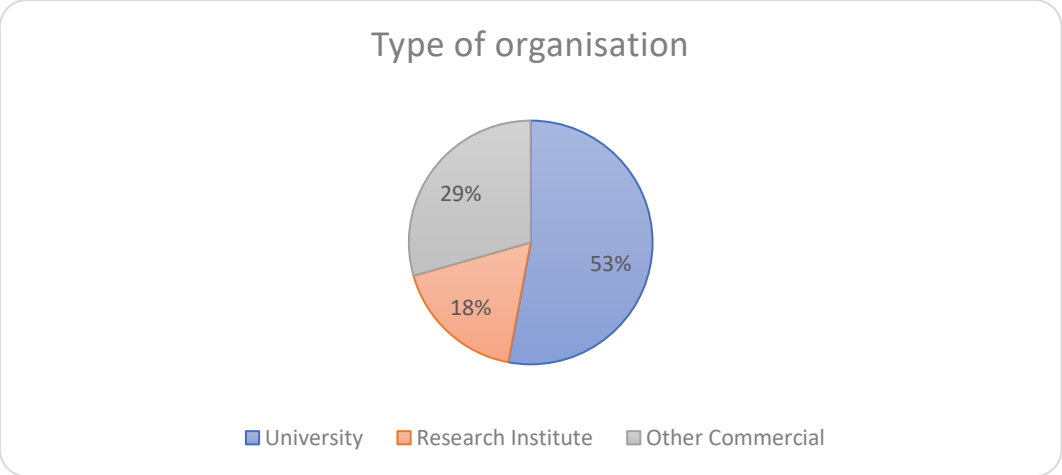

FIGURE 1 – TYPES OF SIGNATORY INSTITUTION OF THE TRANSPARENCY AGREEMENT ON ANIMAL RESEARCH IN BELGIUM

2. COMMITMENT 1:

We will be clear about when, how, and why we use animals in research.

This commitment aims to ensure that all institutions recognise, both internally and externally, that they, or their staff members, carry out or fund animal research. It also seeks to ensure that organisations are transparent about the use of animals in their work.

2.1. Internal Communication

Regarding actions to promote internal communication, the results are described in the graph below (see *Figure 2*). 82% (14/17) of the respondents reported newsletters and internal publications which mention animal research and 76% (13/17) of the institutions mentioned talks and presentations about the use of animals in research. Three of the institutions provide open invitations to attend animal welfare meetings.

In the process of recruiting new employees, half of the signatories 47% (8/17) said they make explicit mention of the animal research conducted at the institution. For employees not involved in animal research, the opportunity is given by 35% (6/17) of the institutions to visit the animal facilities. Participation in or provision of taught courses on animal research, or ethics for students, is reported by 53% (9/17).

Other ways to clearly communicate on the use of animals in research internally are dedicated webpages, Be Open About Animal Research Day (BOARD23), Biomedical Research Awareness Day (BRAD), visits to the animal facilities for students and relevant stakeholders, talks and courses. This is reported by 24% (4/17) of the institutions.

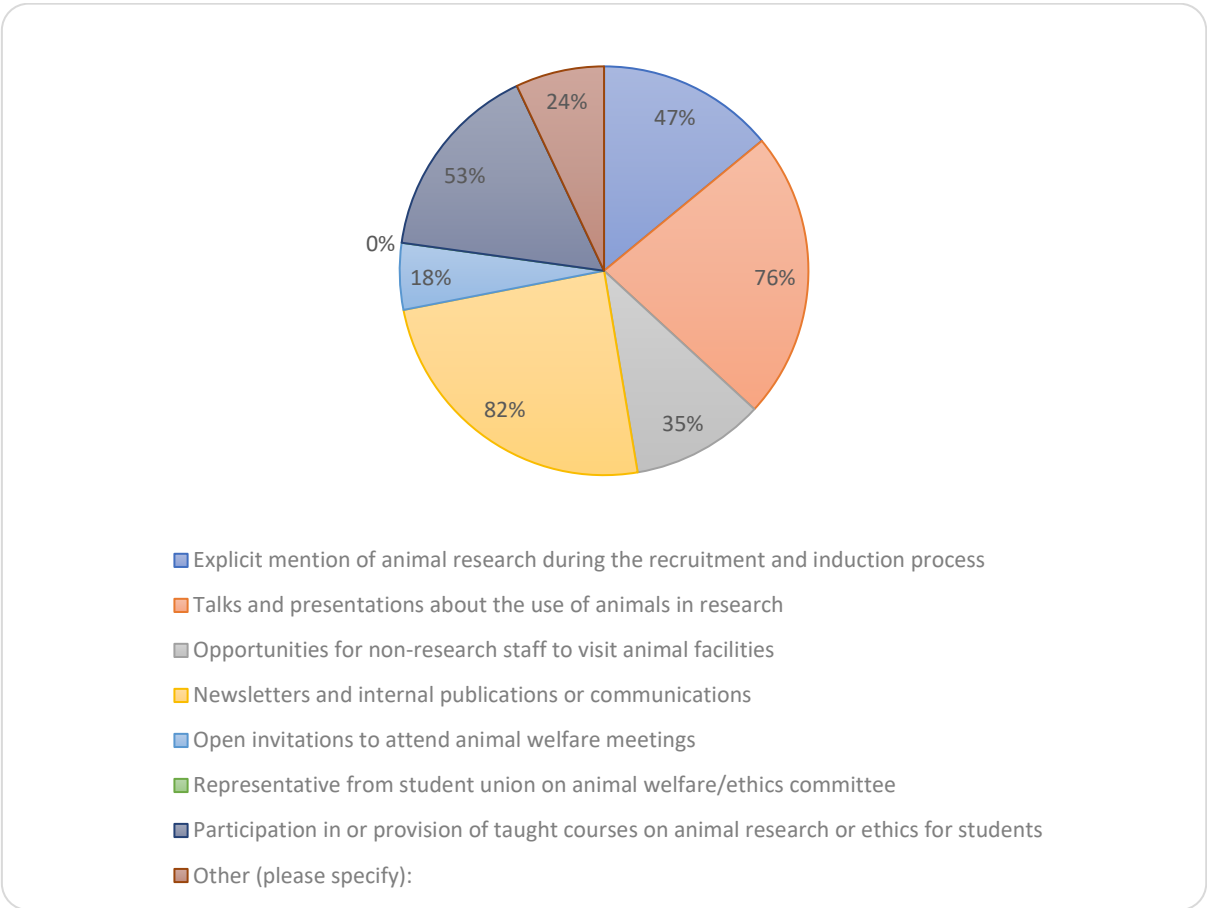

FIGURE 2 - INTERNAL COMMUNICATION OF THE TA SIGNATORIES

2.2. External Communication

The actions to proactively provide information on the conducted animal research to the public (since the agreement is signed) are depicted in *Figure 3* and, are further discussed below.

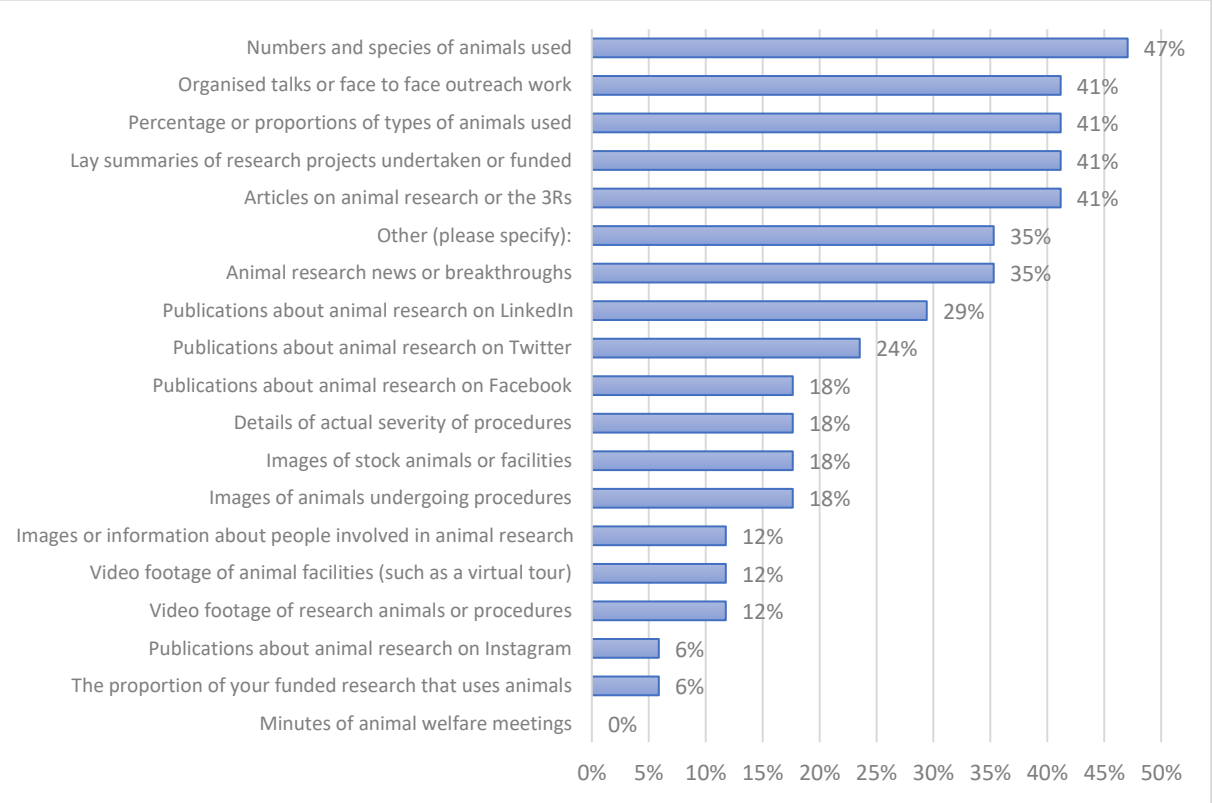

FIGURE 3 - EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION FROM THE INSTITUTIONS

2.2.1. Publishing Statistics

The signatories mostly mentioned the numbers and species of animals used (47%, 8/17). This is followed closely by organised talks or face-to-face outreach work, percentages, or proportions of the types of animals used, lay summaries of research projects undertaken or funded, and articles on animal research or the 3Rs[2] (41%, 7/17). Animal research news or breakthroughs make up 35% (6/17).

According to the most recent statistics for Belgium (2020), a total of 437,275 animals are used in Belgium, of which 58% are mice, followed by 16% rabbits and 9% domestic fowl *(see Figure 4)*.

[2] 3Rs: replacement, refinement, and reduction. See COMMITMENT 2:.

EU Statistical Data of all uses of animals

Member State: Belgium **Year: 2020**

All uses of animals by species

Animal Species	Number of uses	Percentage
Mice	251,913	57.61%
Rats	13,760	3.15%
Guinea-Pigs	11,656	2.67%
Hamsters (Syrian)	2,985	0.68%
Hamsters (Chinese)		
Mongolian gerbil	14	0.00%
Other rodents	213	0.05%
Rabbits	70,761	16.18%
Cats	253	0.06%
Dogs	1,519	0.35%
Ferrets		
Other carnivores		
Horses, donkeys and cross-breeds	199	0.05%
Pigs	5,767	1.32%
Goats	69	0.02%
Sheep	503	0.12%
Cattle	2,329	0.53%
Prosimians		
Marmoset and tamarins		
Cynomolgus monkey		
Rhesus monkey	36	0.01%
Vervets (Chlorocebus spp.)		
Baboons		
Squirrel monkey		
Other species of Old World Monkeys (Cercopithecoidea)		
Other species of New World Monkeys (Ceboidea)		
Apes		
Other mammals	110	0.03%
Domestic fowl	41,115	9.40%
Other birds	4,831	1.10%
Reptiles	105	0.02%
Rana		
Xenopus	957	0.22%
Other amphibians	54	0.01%
Zebra fish	22,804	5.22%
Other fish	5,322	1.22%
Cephalopods		
Total uses	**437,275**	**100.00%**

Origin as registered at the first use

Place of Birth	Number of uses	Percentage
Animals born in the EU at a registered breeder	406,266	93.59%
Animals born in the EU but not at a registered breeder	24,707	5.69%
Animals born in rest of Europe	345	0.08%
Animals born in rest of world	2,761	0.64%
Total uses	**434,079**	**100.00%**

NHP Source (origin)	Number of uses	Percentage
Animals born at a registered breeder within EU	4	66.67%
Animals born in rest of Europe		
Animals born in Asia		
Animals born in America	2	33.33%
Animals born in Africa		
Animals born elsewhere		
Total uses	**6**	**100.00%**

NHP Generation	Number of uses	Percentage
F0		
F1		
F2 or greater	6	100.00%
Self-sustaining colony		
Total uses	**6**	**100.00%**

FIGURE 4 - EU STATISTICAL DATA OF ALL ANIMALS USED IN BELGIUM

Going back to the data of the respondents, lay summaries (non-technical summaries) of research projects are published on the website of 41% (7/17) of the respondents. None of the institutions reported publishing minutes of animal welfare meetings. Three (18%) of the respondents included details of the actual severity of the procedures that are used.

In addition to the publication of statistical data by Member States being one of the requirements of the Directive 2010/63/EU, the non-technical summaries of research projects are also published by the EU, but with no reference to the institute where the project took place. The purpose of these abstracts is to publicly share information about studies that use animals in an objective and clear way, in a language that is accessible to the public.

According to Article 43 of Directive 2010/63/EU non-technical summaries of research projects should include the harms and benefits envisaged and the number and types of animals to be used, as well as a demonstration of compliance with the *replacement, reduction, and refinement* requirement (3Rs, see Commitment 2).

In the evaluation questionnaire, 41% (7/17) of the signatory institutions stated that they include these lay research summaries on their websites (see *Figure 5*).

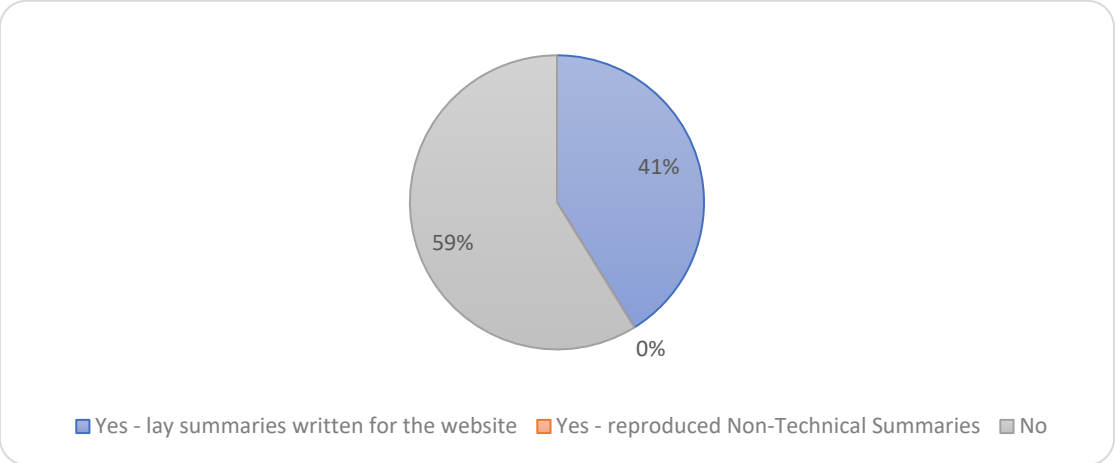

FIGURE 5 – RESEARCH SUMMARIES AVAILABLE ON THE WEBSITES OF THE SIGNATORY INSTITUTIONS TO THE TRANSPARENCY AGREEMENT

2.2.2. Images, Videos, and Social Media

An important component in the openness and transparency on the use of animals in research is the sharing of self-made images and videos on the official websites of the institutions. This is usually the place where the public seeks more information about animal models developed to study a particular topic.

Less than half of the respondents of the Transparency Agreement provide images and/or videos on their websites. The images that have been shared most with the public are images of stock animals or facilities (18%, 3/17), actual animals undergoing procedures (18%, 3/17, see *Figure 6*) and information about people involved in animal research (12%, 2/17). Video footage of research animals or procedures and footage of animal facilities (like a virtual tour) are less common, with two (12%) institutions providing these, namely **KU Leuven** and **INBO** (Instituut voor Natuur- en Bosonderzoek). **UGent** mentioned both types of video footage are in preparation.

FIGURE 6 – FRAME OF A LATERAL HIGH-SPEED VIDEO IMAGE (300 IMAGES/SEC) OF A (BIPEDAL) RUNNING, SMALL, LACERTID LIZARD. IMAGE BY IMAGE THE POSITIONS OF THE IMPORTANT ANATOMIC POINTS (E.G. SNOUT, SHOULDER, PELVIS, KNEE, ETC.) ARE DIGITISED IN ORDER TO RECONSTRUCT THE MOVEMENT PATTERNS AT **UANTWERP**

Regarding social media, LinkedIn seems to be the preferred platform with 29% (5/17), followed by Twitter with 24% (4/17) and Facebook with 18% (3/17). One of the institutions reported to use Instagram.

2.3. Other Information

Successful implementations of the first commitment are answered with a clear YES by 59% (10/17) of the institutions. Different examples include:

- A dashboard on the website with the annual statistics of the animals that are used,
- Taking part in Be Open About Animal Research Day Open (#BOARD22),
- Open Days,
- Interview with a student's journal,
- Posters,
- Newsletters, …

35% (6/17) of the respondents publicly share other information such as:

- The institution mentions the number of facilities with animals, including the veterinary oversight.
- The AAALAC accreditation.
- **Janssen** publishes the percentage of research performed in rodents and fish when there are no non-animal alternatives available in a Health for Humanity report.

Two (12%) respondents do not promote external communication of animals in research by any means described in *Figure 3*.

In addition to the publication of statistical data by Member States being one of the requirements of the Directive 2010/63/EU, the non-technical summaries of research projects are also published by the EU, but with no reference to the institutions where the project took place. The purpose of these abstracts is to publicly share information about studies that use animals in an objective and clear way, in a language that is accessible to the public.

According to Article 43 of Directive 2010/63/EU non-technical summaries of research projects should include the harms and benefits envisaged and the number and types of animals to be used, as well as a demonstration of compliance with the *replacement, reduction, and refinement* requirement (3Rs, see Commitment 2).

In the evaluation questionnaire, 41% (7/17) of the signatory institutions stated that they include these lay research summaries on their websites (see *Figure 7*).

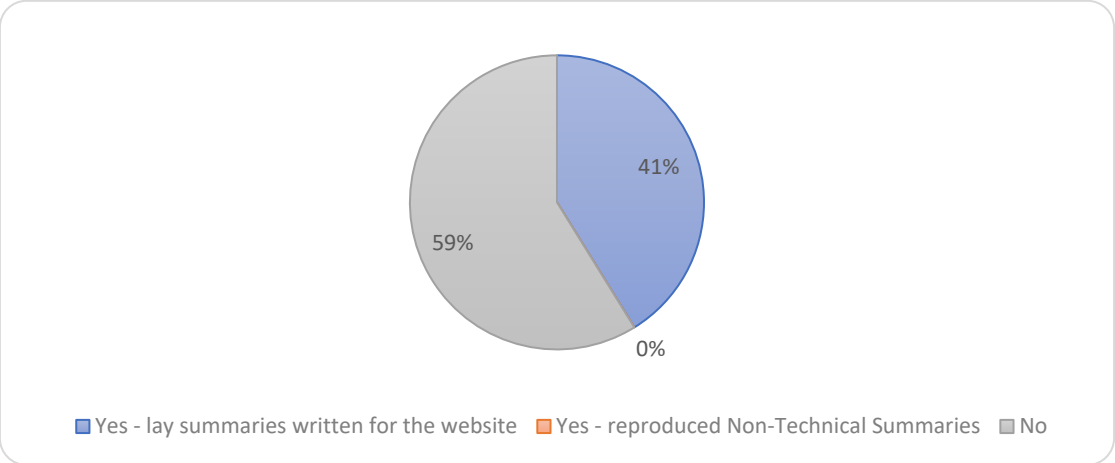

FIGURE 7 – RESEARCH SUMMARIES AVAILABLE ON THE WEBSITES OF THE SIGNATORY INSTITUTIONS TO THE TRANSPARENCY AGREEMENT

The first commitment of the Transparency Agreement also includes the adoption of an open approach to communicating animal research in collaborative projects and partnerships, which means sharing knowledge and experiences with other partners (see *Figure 8*).

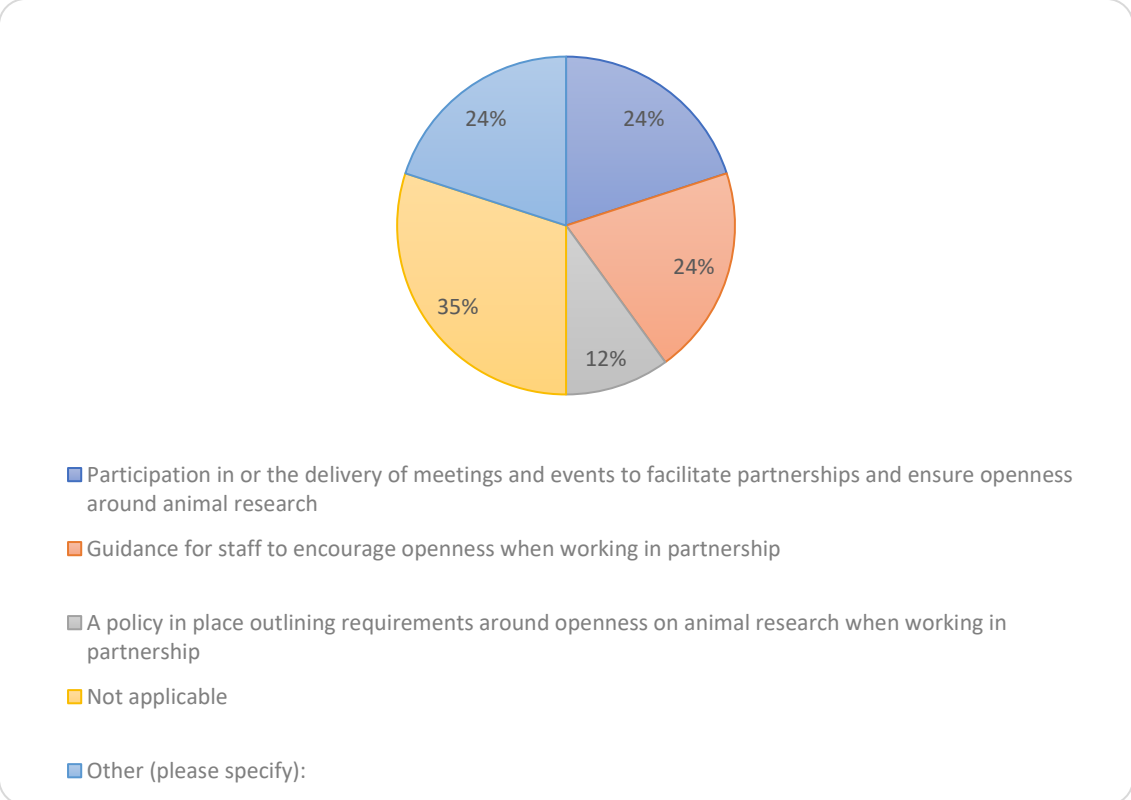

FIGURE 8 - WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

In the survey, 24% (4/17) of the signatories participated in or, organised meetings and events, to facilitate partnerships and ensure openness around animal research. Guidance for staff to encourage openness when working in partnership is also provided by 24% (4/17) of the respondents. Two (12%) of the institutions have a policy in place outlining requirements around

openness on animal research when working in partnership. 35% (6/17) of the respondents do not work in partnership.

Four (24%) signatories mention that they use other means such as a policy that promotes the openness to partners, a radio interview, the website of the university, press articles and retrospective analysis documents that have been set up to evaluate the commitment of partners to the 3Rs and the animal care.

All 17 signatories mention to reply to questions asked about animal research, both internally and externally (see *Figure 9*). 41% (7/17) of the respondents mention that scientists are allowed/encouraged/trained to respond to such questions. Six (35%) institutions have a specific mailbox for such questions which is forwarded to specific spokesperson(s). A FAQ section or document is available for scientists to respond at four (24%) institutions, while two (12%) signatories provide a publicly available FAQ section on their websites. One signatory has no policy in place. Eight (47%) respondents mention the following other strategies:

- Questions are most often forwarded to members of the animal research working groups.
- Questions are addressed to one contact person (ethics committee president).
- Media training courses are provided, especially for specific spokespersons.
- The working group of the Transparency Agreement and the Department of Communication evaluate who is best suited to provide feedback.
- External communications are organised by Communications Belgium or the R&D site Head.
- A global animal welfare policy is in place and any inquiries are discussed with the global organisation.
- A FAQ document is available for communication personnel.

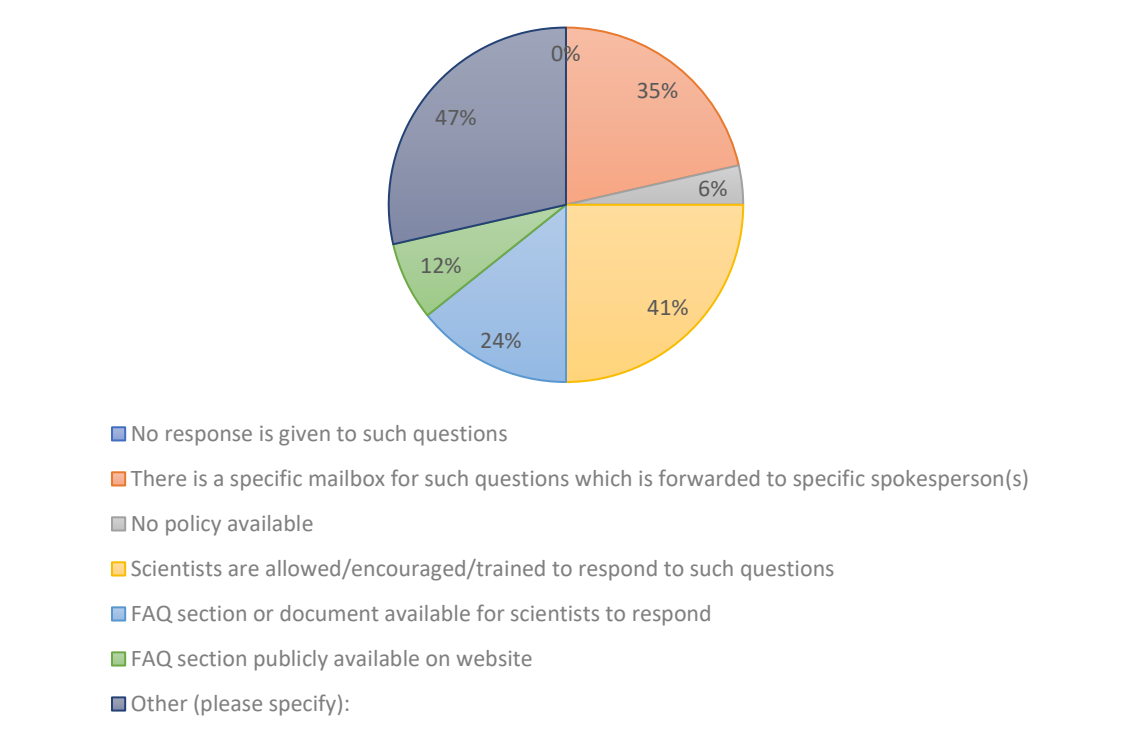

FIGURE 9 - STRATEGY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

When asked if there are barriers to the implementation of this commitment, five (29%) of the institutions replied, 'yes' and 12 (71%) answered 'no'. The main causes given are concerns of possible reprisals by activists, confidentiality reasons and the caution among researchers to talk openly about their research including animals.

Three (18%) of the institutions say that barriers to the implementation of the First Commitment have been removed since the first annual report last year. Comments that are given:

- The institution only publishes cases on the website of animal experiments that are completed.
- There is a step forward needed to improve communication on 3Rs and alternative methods both in the internal and external websites of the signatories; there are ongoing discussions and there is a plan to evaluate and collect available communication material internally.
- Communication representatives are more involved in the management of the Transparency Agreement (Communication Calls[3]).

[3] Since the beginning of 2023, a recurrent Communication Call (every 3 months) is established with the communication representatives of the signatories to stimulate ideas and exchange experiences.

3. COMMITMENT 2:

We will enhance our communications with the media and the public about our research in Belgium using animals.

The purpose of this Commitment is to ensure that relevant details on the involvement of signatories in animal research are easily accessible to the public. It is based on the practical steps, outlined in Commitment 1, that organisations can or should take to improve their communication around animal research.

Since the implementation of the Transparency Agreement, the means of communication with the media (see *Figure 10*) have included interviews, or long-form pieces in which the use of animals in research have been mentioned (29%, 5/17), and comment to the media on a general issue around animal research (24%, 4/17). Participation as a panel member for a press-conference, or briefing on animal research, was done by 18% (3/17) of the signatories, as well as providing a reactive comment to the media regarding their use of animals in research. Giving media access to the animal facilities is done by two (12%) institutions and one (6%) signatory proactively commented to the media on their use of animals in research.

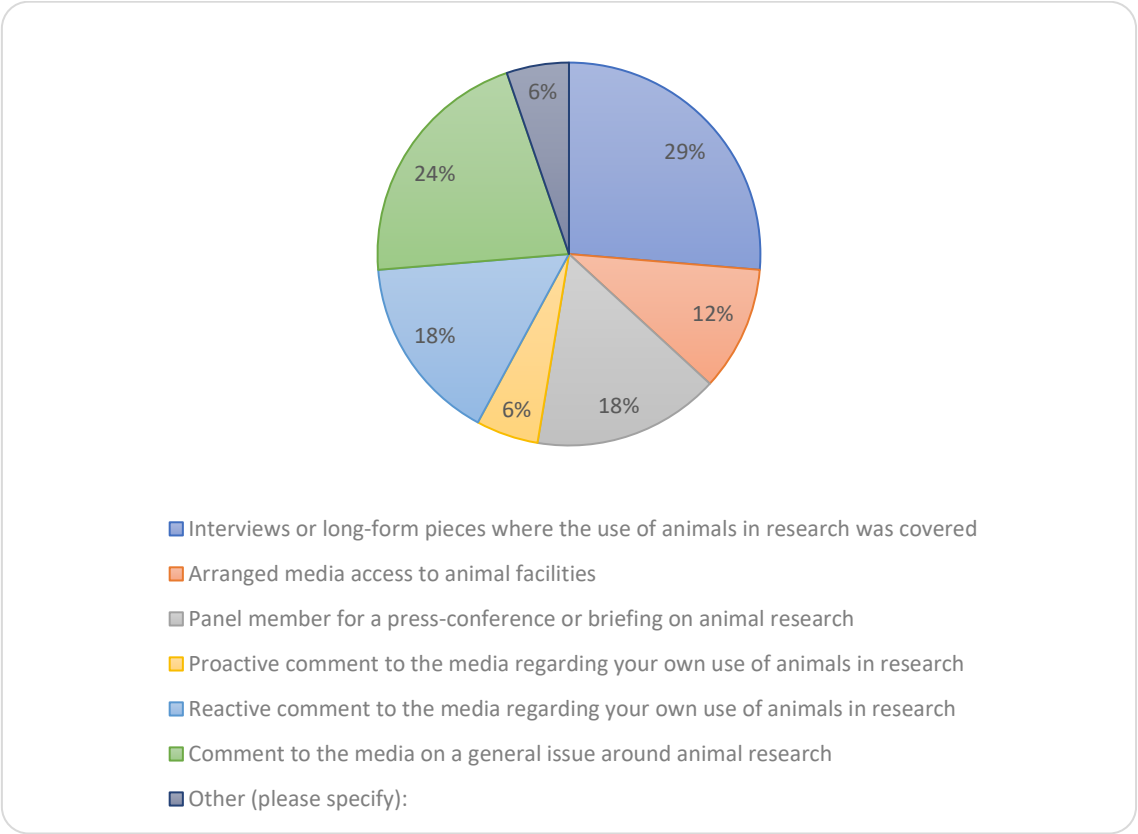

FIGURE 10 - MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Another means of communication, mentioned by one (6%) institution, is a contribution to visit animal facilities organised by another organisation in Belgium. Three respondents mentioned that none of the above are applicable to their institution.

Regarding the opportunities for communication training for scientists, staff or students who wish to communicate about their animal research, 41% (7/17) of the institutions say that these opportunities are available, while those institutions which do not offer this type of training say that they have a spokesperson.

Communication on the use of animals in research also includes communicating on replacement, reduction, and refinement principles. These principles consist of:

- **Replacement**:
  Use of methods which avoid or replace the use of animals.
- **Reduction**:
  Use of methods which minimise the number of animals used per experiment.
- **Refinement:**
  Methods which minimise animal suffering and improve welfare.

To promote better communication on the 3Rs (see *Figure 11*), more than half (9/17) of the signatories reported examples on their websites, followed by examples provided by associations like EARA and BCLAS with other initiatives including participation in the RE-PLACE initiative, conference posters, visits to animal facilities, which are done by eight (47%) institutions. Examples through other publications are mentioned by six (35%) institutions and debates/awards by three (18%) signatories. One institution mentioned that none of the above is applicable and another institution said general training for researchers on animal research is necessary, both making up 12% of the other responses.

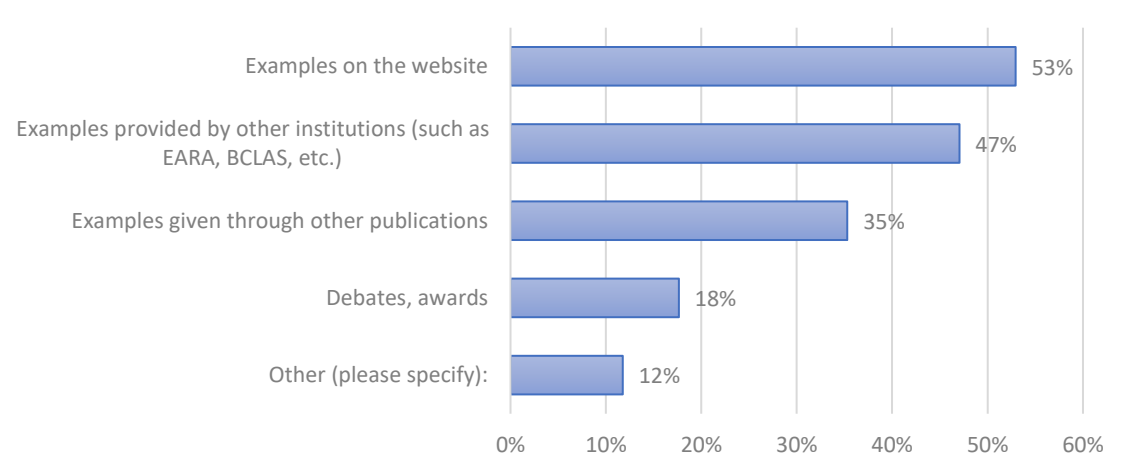

FIGURE 11 - FORMS OF COMMUNICATION ON THE 3RS PRINCIPLES BY THE SIGNATORY INSTITUTIONS

One of the core requirements of the Transparency Agreement is the placement of a publicly accessible statement on the institution's website, which explains the institution's involvement with animal research. The survey revealed that the vast majority of signatory institutions (82%, 14/17), have such declaration already available on their website.

Eight (47%) signatories shared successful examples on the implementation of the Second Commitment:

- Articles are published involving animal training models.
- Annual reports are published.
- Participation in the IC-3Rs 2022 Symposium in the roundtable discussion: *How can Ethics Committees contribute to the 3Rs with focus on Refinement and Reduction? Panel discussion on practical case studies with representatives of Belgian Universities* on September 21, 2022.
- Participation in BOARD and BRAD.
- Participation in roundtable discussions initiated by the Flemish Government.

Five (29%) institutions mentioned that there are still barriers to implement the Second Commitment. The reasons are concerns of possible reprisals by activists, difficulty defining when and what individual scientists can communicate, the difficulty to find time and resources to develop a dedicated and sustainable communication strategy and IP[4] constraints. None of the institutions experienced an additional barrier nor elimination of any existing barriers to successfully implement the Second Commitment since the last report.

In 2021, the Animal Welfare Service of Flanders, in consultation with research organisations, started a project aimed at reducing the number of animal experiments in Flanders. During roundtable discussions, researchers provided information and insights about the opportunities for reduction. This provided a source of inspiration for subsequent discussions with organisations that hold a key to influencing the number of animal experiments. The project resulted in actions to which the involved organisations committed.

More information on the *Action plan to reduce animal testing* with its 33 actions, as well as a link to the full report, drafted by project partner Technopolis NV[5] can be found here below (in Dutch):

- https://www.vlaanderen.be/actieplan-vermindering-dierproeven
- https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1695300246/Actieplan_Vermindering_Dierproeven_k8inqc.pdf

[4] IP: Intellectual Property
[5] NV: Naamloze Venootschap (limited company, LTD)

4. COMMITMENT 3:

We will be proactive in providing opportunities for the public to find out about research using animals and the regulations that govern it.

This Commitment aims to encourage more public discussion in Belgium on animal research. It is based on Commitments 1 and 2 suggesting ways in which signatories can proactively engage - directly and indirectly - with the public, in addition to providing more information.

The most common activities reported by the signatories for the fulfilment of the third commitment (see *Figure 12*) are the collaborative activities organised by partner bodies such as EARA and BCLAS (65%, 11/17), open days (41%, 7/17), engagements with local schools and science festivals (29%, 5/17).

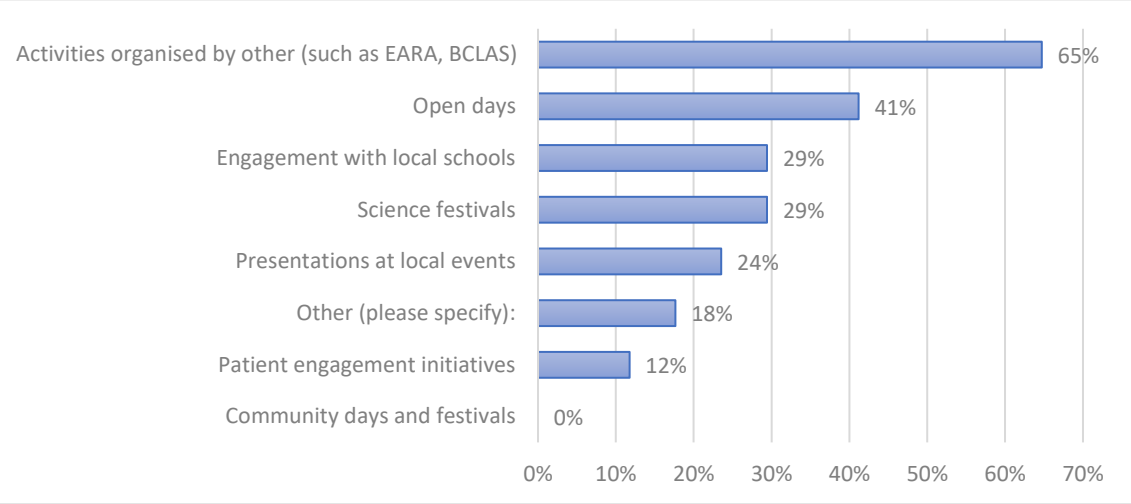

FIGURE 12 - ACTIVITIES IN WHICH INSTITUTIONS HAVE PARTICIPATED SINCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRANSPARENCY AGREEMENT

Among the advice and support provided to those involved in these initiatives, the signatories mentioned the following topics:

- Researchers participated in EARA/LERU media training on how to improve communication.
- An info session will be included in the next "Day of Science".
- Participation in #BOARD22.
- Availability of press papers or text that will be published online.
- Organisation of a general biotech open day.
- School visits and rehoming programmes of the animals used in experiments.
- Be clear and give a good explanation (at the visitor's level), without going into too much technical detail.
- A 3Rs award.
- Organisation of a big event for citizens where visits to the animal facilities are possible, and also information about the animal research is given.

Seven of the signatories (41%) gave access to their animal facilities for politicians, parliamentarians, and MEPs[6]. Six (35%) signatories received students or staff (not researchers) from another institution. Three (18%) institutions organised an Open Door Day. When animal

[6] MEP: Member of the European Parliament

safety and welfare measures did not allow for visits, 18% (3/17) of the signatories offered alternatives such as the footage (videos and images) of the animal facilities (see *Figure 13*).

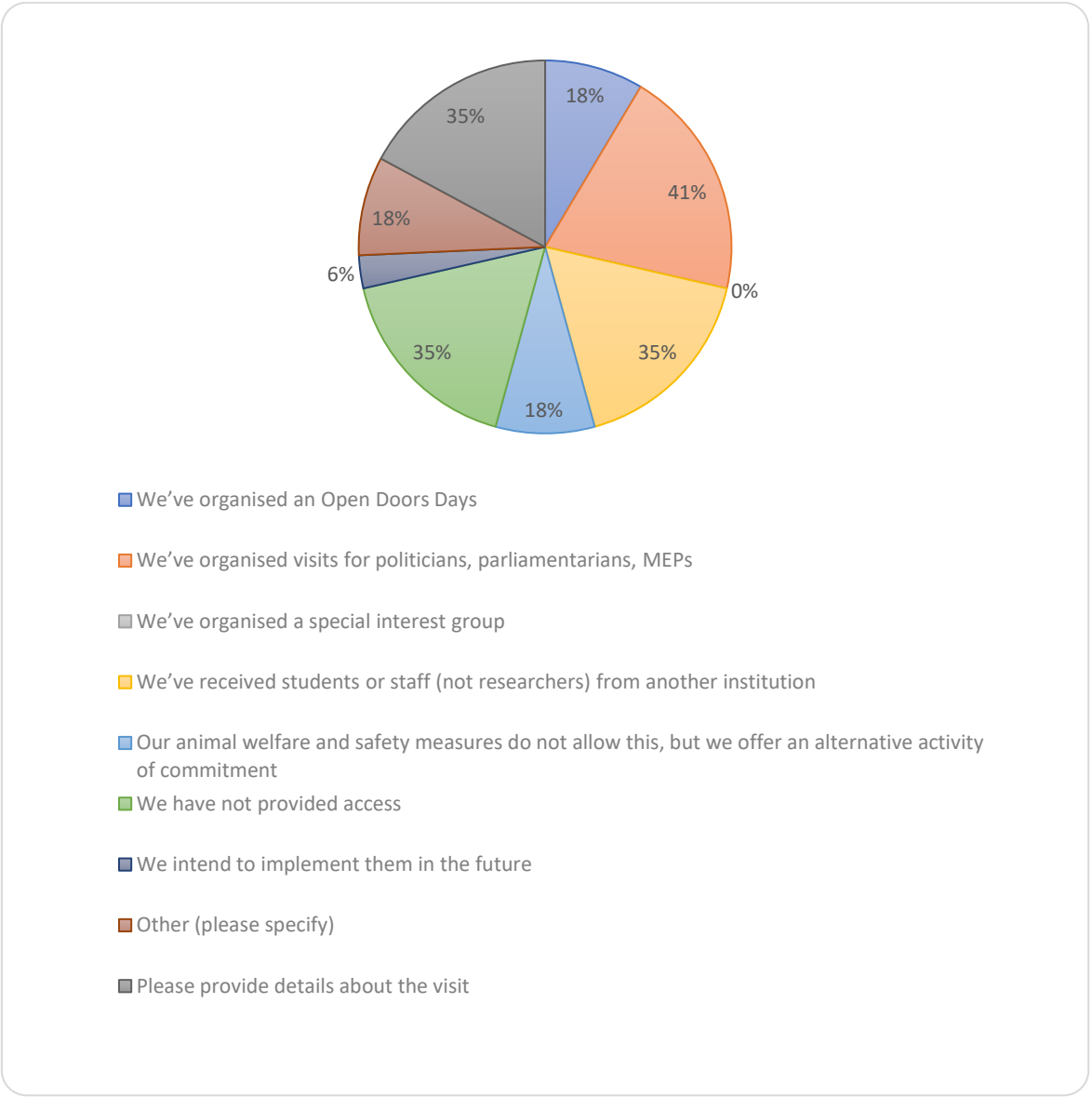

FIGURE 13 - ACCESS TO THE ANIMAL FACILITY

Six (35%) institutions declined requests to visit their animal facilities for safety and well-being reasons of which two (12%) refused a visit since the last report. One (6%) institution is planning to implement access to visitors in the future.

Seven (41%) signatories have successfully implemented the Third Commitment by organising a family day, a day of science, inviting Flemish parliamentarians, or giving an extensive update on the research and ethical review process on the public website.

About a quarter of the signatories (24%, 4/17) experienced a barrier for implementation of the Third Commitment. Reasons that are given were the concern for the safety and welfare of the animals and the transition after the Covid pandemic. None of the institutions experienced that any barriers are eliminated to successfully implement the Third Commitment since the last report.

5. Conclusions and Challenges ahead

The Transparency Agreement on Animal Research demonstrates the ongoing desire of the Belgian scientific community to encourage society to be more informed about the use of animals in science in a voluntary but coordinated way. All the signatories gave *feedback* on the implementation of the agreement in their institutions, reinforcing their involvement with this initiative.

Openness and transparency can be a slow process, but it is one that will eventually translate into concrete actions and knowledge sharing with the public. In the long term the implementation of these commitments by the biomedical sector can make a decisive difference in political decisions, and in national and international strategies on animal research. The results of this evaluation report and the fact that all 17 institutions replied to this survey, show the effort and dedication by the signatory institutions to achieve these aims.

All but one signatory agreed that the Transparency Agreement is important for the biomedical research sector in Belgium. The signatories believe that the implementation of this more open approach on the use of animals in research can lead to real changes in their institutions. The institutions state that it is a motivation to be continually working on openness and to be thinking of new ways to implement the different commitments coupled to this Transparency Agreement. However, many scientists still think it is better to be discrete than to be transparent. This has stimulated the signatory organisations to increase their transparency even further and establish concrete actions to be applied in practice, even if there is still push back and hesitancy from some quarters.

One of the requirements for institutions to be part of the Agreement is to provide a position statement on their involvement with animal research on their website (within one year after joining). Only three institutions have not met this requirement yet but are working hard to provide such a statement on the respective websites. EARA can work with the signatories to assist in the draft of their website declaration, however if this requirement is not met, the advice would be for the institution to step down from the Transparency Agreement, until the day comes when it has met the requirement.

The information available on institutional websites, including the publication of non-technical summaries of authorised projects, images and/or videos, and statistical data on the number and type of animals used in research are also areas that could see improvement in the future.

The form and speed of implementation of all commitments varies, of course, from institution to institution, and all of them have started from different levels of openness and transparency. Although this is not a conditioning factor, one aspect highlighted in the survey is the need for meetings, both in person and online, with the different institutions. The online (free) media training, available from EARA, helps researchers and communication personnel to communicate more open about animal research.

Most respondents agree that the Communication Call, which is organised every three months, is a good initiative to spark ideas and inspire each other to be more open on animals in research, but also to exchange different ideas. These virtual meetings gather all the communication representatives of the signatories.

6. Next Steps

As future challenges for the continuous improvement of the implementation of the Agreement in Belgium, the following areas stand out:

- Promoting further **joint initiatives** where members of the Agreement can be united in the message to be shared, such as in the publication of new statistical data on the use of animals in research. In this way it is more likely that the debate on animal research will be balanced, and that the voice of the scientific community is heard at times when communication with the public has never been more critical. The Communication Call is already a step in the right direction.

- **Increasing the number of signatory institutions**, including different institutions such as medical charities that fund animal research. The growth of the Agreement at the national level will give more visibility to this issue and will highlight the strength of the biomedical sector in Belgium.

- Creating **more opportunities to help signatory institutions meet the Agreement's commitments**, such as more social media activities (#TransparencyThursday, #LetsTalkSciComm, and Get on BOARD).

Annex I - Examples of Implementation of Commitments

Examples provided by the signatories to demonstrate the implementation of the Commitments of the Transparency Agreement on Animal Research in Belgium

Presence in the media:

- Interviews in student's journal, Article in popular TV magazine (Dag Allemaal), **KU Leuven.**
- https://www.voka.be/nieuws/orsi-academy-trainings-en-expertisecentrum-robotchirurgie-op-areldniveau This is a general article, including a section on the animal training models, **Orsi Academy.**

Lectures & posters:

- Contact and info meeting with politicians, Annual reports 2020 and 2021 are published since the last report. Public website is updated, with an extra Q&A section **KULeuven.**
- An info session will be organised in the upcoming "Day of Science" in Belgium. During this day, external individuals are invited to come to the university to learn more about research and education, **Uhasselt.**
- The ethics committee successfully provided feedback on a request from the government to clarify on the housing and use of birds. The question came based on a publicly published non-technical summary. A member of the Transparency Agreement working group has participated in the IC-3Rs 2022 Symposium in the Round table discussion: "How can Ethical Committees contribute to the 3Rs with focus on Refinement and Reduction? Panel discussion on practical case studies with representatives of Belgian Universities" on September 21, 2022, **UAntwerp.**
- In communication about specific research (like symposia, conferences) the animal experiments are explained. Also, a presentation about the facilities and type of research is given, **ILVO.**
- Our Health for Humanity Report 2022 is recently published where animal welfare is discussed in more detail, participation from Janssen experts in round tables discussions initiated by the Flemish Government, **Janssen.**

Tours & site visits:

- School visits at the main site (labs and offices) including a presentation on the animal work, internal communication in animal research in Newsletter on a monthly basis, **Sanofi.**
- Each year students visit our facilities. We organise "Open Days" where people can visit some facilities (biosecurity!) and can ask questions to the attending researchers, **ILVO.**
- We invited Belgian (Flemish) MEP's to our facility in January 2022, **UGent.**
- Visits by non-research staff of our university, Interviews in student's journal, Contact and info meeting with politicians, **KU Leuven.**

- We organised a "Family Day". During this day, every employee could bring his/her family and the facilities of the organisation are showed. However, the animal facilities are not showed (to avoid stress), but the use of animals is clearly explained, **Orsi Academy.**

Statements on the use of animals in research on a publicly accessible website:

Institution	Website
GSK	https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/responsibility/ethical-standards/use-of-animals/
ILVO	https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/nl/transparantie-over-dierenproeven
INBO	https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/over-ons/dierproeven/
Janssen	https://www.jnj.com/about-jnj/policies-and-positions/animal-welfare-policy#:~:text=Johnson%20%26%20Johnson%20Animal%20Welfare%
KU Leuven	https://gbiomed.kuleuven.be/english/corefacilities/research-involving-laboratory-animals/vision
Orsi Academy	https://www.orsi-online.com/training-models-regulation
Sanofi Ghent	https://www.sanofi.com/en/our-company/social-impact/responsible-business-values/animals-in-research-and-production
UAntwerp	https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/projecten/dierproeven/
UCB Biopharma SRL	https://www.ucb.com/our-company/ethical-business-practices
UCLouvain	In progress
UGent	https://www.ugent.be/en/research/science-society/labanimals/vision.htm
UHasselt	https://www.uhasselt.be/en/aparte-sites-uhasselt-en/policy-on-animal-research
ULB	In progress
ULiège	In progress
UMONS	https://web.umons.ac.be/en/recherche/animal-research-transparency-agreement/
VIB	https://vib.be/en/research-and-impact/responsible-research/why-animal-research-necessary
VUB	https://dierproeven.vub.be/nl/visie

Projects published on the websites of the institutions:

Institution	Website
GSK	https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/research-and-development/research/
ILVO	https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/nl/onderzoeksprojecten
INBO	https://www.vlaanderen.be/inbo/en-gb/publications/?search-term=&themas=undefined&organisation-unit=-1&authors=&authorName=Select+an+author&from=-1&until=-1&pageNumber=1&sorting=undefined&language-filter=-1&theme-filter=-1&type=-1&searchPdf=true
Janssen	https://www.janssen.com/belgium/science
KU Leuven	https://gbiomed.kuleuven.be/english/corefacilities/research-involving-laboratory-animals/research-involving-laboratory-animals/research-laboratory-animals
Orsi Academy	https://www.orsi-online.com/news
Sanofi Ghent	https://www.sanofi.com/en/science-and-innovation/research-and-development
UAntwerp	https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/projecten/dierproeven/onderzoek/
UCB Biopharma SRL	https://www.ucb.com/our-science/Overview
UCLouvain	https://uclouvain.be/en/research
UGent	https://biblio.ugent.be/
UHasselt	https://www.uhasselt.be/nl/instituten/biomed/nieuws
ULB	https://www.ulb.be/en/research/research-projects
ULiège	https://www.recherche.uliege.be/cms/c_11496916/en/research-at-uliege
UMONS	https://web.umons.ac.be/en/missions/research/
VIB	https://vib.be/publications
VUB	https://dierproeven.vub.be/nl/onderzoeksdomeinen

Non-technical summaries of authorised projects:

- https://gbiomed.kuleuven.be/english/corefacilities/research-involving-laboratory-animals/research-involving-laboratory-animals/research-laboratory-animals, **KU Leuven**
- https://gbiomed.kuleuven.be/english/corefacilities/research-involving-laboratory-animals/in-general-in-the-media, **KU Leuven**
- https://dierproeven.vub.be/nl/onderzoeksdomeinen, **VUB**
- https://www.sanofi.be/nl/over-ons/science-et-innovation, **Sanofi**
- https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/nl/dossiers, **ILVO**
- https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/projecten/dierproeven/onderzoek/studies-met-proefdieren/, **UAntwerpen**
- https://www.ugent.be/nl/onderzoek/maatschappij/dierproeven, **UGent**
- https://www.uhasselt.be/nl/aparte-sites-uhasselt/dierproefbeleid, **UHasselt**

Be Open About Animal Research Day 2022 (#BOARD22):

Institution	#BOARD22
Orsi Academy	The welfare of our laboratory animals

Annex II - Logos of the Signatories of the Agreement 2020

Annex III - List of signatories to the Agreement 2020

Institution	Full Name	City
GSK	GlaxoSmithKline	Wavre
ILVO	Instituut voor Landbouw-, Visserij- en Voedingsonderzoek	Melle
INBO	Instituut voor Natuur- en Bosonderzoek	Brussel
Janssen	Janssen Pharmaceutica	Beerse
KU Leuven	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven	Leuven
Orsi Academy	Orsi Academy	Melle
Sanofi Ghent	Sanofi Ghent	Zwijnaarde (Gent)
UAntwerpen	Universiteit Antwerpen	Antwerpen
UCB Biopharma SRL	Union Chimique Belge	Brussel
UCLouvain	Université catholique de Louvain	Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve
UGent	Universiteit Gent	Gent
UHasselt	Universiteit Hasselt	Hasselt
ULB	Université Libre de Bruxelles	Brussel
ULiège	Université de Liège	Luik
UMONS	Université de Mons	Bergen
VIB	Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie	Gent
VUB	Vrije Universiteit Brussel	Elsene