

FWO HR-strategy 2019-2023

I Introduction

FWO is a funding agency for curiosity driven and strategic research which is mainly carried out in the Flemish Universities. FWO can thus play a decisive role in bringing about change with respect to key issues in research careers, by modeling and designing its programs and funding modalities according to the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, commonly known as “Charter & Code”. Therefore the FWO has endorsed Charter & Code from the outset, and many of the points contained in the Charter and the Code are already standard practice at FWO.

It is clear that there is a great willingness on behalf of Flemish S&T actors to move forward in this area, as witnessed by the fact that all Flemish universities have signed Charter & Code. FWO calls on the universities in particular, but also to all other institutions that are eligible for FWO funding, to actively implement Charter & Code in their policies.

HR constitutes an integral part of FWO’s policy cycle. Every five years FWO performs a thorough evaluation of its current policy, including HR aspects related to evaluation procedures or regulations for its funded researchers. This evaluation involves a consultation process both internally (among FWO staff members) and externally (among researchers in Flanders and in particular those funded by FWO) and covers all topics of Charter & Code that are relevant for the FWO.

In what follows we present an extract of FWO’s policy plan for the period 2019 to 2023 (full text available in Dutch only at <https://www.fwo.be/media/1023695/beleidsplan-20192023.pdf>) concerning all HR-related policy changes planned for the current cycle that address gaps related to the “Charter & Code”. We refer to the relevant points of the Charter and Code in this HR strategy document. This text will be updated after the evaluation of the actual cycle in 2023.

The FWO formulated 34 strategic goals, of which nine are HR-related, that should be reached by the end of 2023. These nine strategic goals are presented below, accompanied by the operational goals that were derived from the strategy as well as a concrete timing for implementation. These operational goals are concrete actions that FWO will undertake to reach each respective strategic goal.

The FWO HR Strategy is coordinated by the FWO research policy department (under supervision of the Secretary General), in close consultation with the HR management, and taking into account feedback from our main stakeholders, the Flemish universities and researchers.

More specifically, the following functions will be primarily responsible for the process:

Secretary-General (1)

Coordinator of the Research Policy Department (1)

Senior Science Administrators (Policy Officers) (12)

Director Administration (1)

Head of staff department (1)

II FWO HR Strategy 2019 - 2023

1. PhD fellowships program: making the right choice and a new subprogram (C&C 13, 14)

The PhD fellowship, which the FWO has offered for years for fundamental research, and the SB grant, which it took over from the former IWT and is aimed at strategic basic research, will be fully aligned from 2019, as respectively “PhD fellowship fundamental research” and “PhD fellowship strategic basic research”. These programs will have the same timeline, equal eligibility criteria and ditto evaluation and selection procedures. In addition to specific additional evaluation criteria for SB, the expert panels are also different, with for SB also experts involved in industrial R&D. The equivalence of both doctoral programs is also emphasized. Candidates can submit an application for a fellowship (maximum twice), with a mandatory choice between one of the two programs. That choice is substantive: how does the candidate see himself developing into a researcher and what is the research design and purpose of the doctoral project? Research careers of young scientists mostly evolve towards non-academic research careers. The distinction between the two fellowships programs was amongst others further stressed to cope with this changed reality.

The FWO will inform potential candidates for both programs, as well as the panel members involved, and raise awareness about the uniqueness of and the differences between fundamental and strategic basic research. In time, the score grid can be adjusted to exclude proposals submitted in the wrong channel. As there are currently no fellowships available for strategic research with a societal finality, supplementing the FWO program offering doctoral grants for this purpose would be recommended, in this case with the extension of the SB program to projects with a societal purpose. Completing the spectrum of PhD fellowships will help candidates to make to better-founded program choices.

For all PhD fellowships, the term in which the doctoral students obtain their doctorate (the so-called "time to degree") is also monitored. Doctoral students should be given sufficient time to prepare their thesis, and the 4-year fellowship of the FWO remains a good standard for this, but candidates should not linger too long in the doctoral process. Adapting our policy on this matter evidently takes place in close consultation with the universities and other relevant host institutions.

Operational goals:

- 1.1 The FWO monitors the intake for the relevance of the choice for one of the two PhD channels, taking into account the characteristics per PhD channel. The results of this monitoring form the basis for actively guiding channel choices and sharpening the channels so that the correct proposals are submitted in the correct channel. (2019-2023)*
- 1.2 The FWO is conducting an information and awareness campaign to emphasize complementarity and synergy between fundamental and strategic research. (2019-2023)*
- 1.3 The PhD fellowships SB are expanded with a societal finality. (2019-2023)*

2. Research output: extending the definition (C&C 16)

For the assessment of scientific achievements, the traditional approach involves evaluating the quality and quantity of scientific publications. The quality is usually derived from the number of citations of a publication or the impact factor of a journal, which in turn is a function of the number of citations of the journal. However, this focus on bibliometric indicators poses several problems, as

cited in the Leiden Manifesto¹. For this reason, the FWO has taken measures in recent years to shift the focus in the assessment from quantitative aspects of research results to qualitative aspects, in line with the recommendations in the above-mentioned manifesto.

In the past decades, attention has also been paid to the phenomenon of publication bias in various disciplines. The latter means that scientists are less inclined to share negative results with colleagues through publications. Explanations given for this may also be linked to the problem of quantification of investigator performance described above. After all, such results are less readily accepted by magazines and, moreover, they are usually cited less often. Nevertheless, scientists agree on the importance of negative research results.

A recent trend in the research world is open science: making information from the entire research cycle available to the public. Here too, the focus on bibliometrics counteracts the internationally endorsed trend towards open access. After all, many researchers prefer to publish in journals with a high impact factor. Such journals are still often owned by traditional publishers, which, however, do not always publish their articles via open access. However, open science is not only about publishing research results in open access journals, but also about sharing research data, infrastructure and research instruments. However, such initiatives are not made visible with bibliometric indicators.

The above findings prompt us to reconsider the way in which scientific achievements of the applicants are evaluated by the FWO. An extension of the concept of research results is imperative. In doing so, different types of "output" should be taken into account. Traditionally, publications are regarded as the "gold standard", they are considered to be the carriers of research results par excellence. Obviously, a carrier of scientific content is not a criterion for scientific quality in itself, but different types of carriers are de facto and de jure perceived and honored as more or less qualitative. Efforts by researchers in the field of open science, involving other information carriers and types (e.g. databases with raw or processed research data) are now often not valued in the same way as publications. This difference in appreciation also applies to types of results, in particular positive versus negative research results, while the latter can also provide important insights. A plea for a broad qualitative evaluation of scientific achievements is therefore warranted.

As far as the actual scientific criteria themselves are concerned, the current evaluation procedures use different evaluation criteria which can be categorized under two main themes, namely the scientific competences of the applicant on the one hand and the quality of the project proposal on the other. In order to avoid contamination between these main criteria, it is important to assess these two aspects independently and also to determine the weight of these main criteria. For personal fellowships, we therefore already included in the new regulations that the greatest weight is assigned to scientific competences, for research projects, on the other hand, the focus is on the quality of the project proposal.

Operational goals:

- 2.1 The FWO will structure its application forms in such a way that researchers pay more attention to the quality and impact that their previous research has had, whereby impact is understood more broadly than according to the classic bibliometric standards. (2020)*
- 2.2 The FWO will continue to inform its evaluators of the requirement to support original and risky research. (2019-2023)*

¹ <https://www.nature.com/news/bibliometrics-the-leiden-manifesto-for-research-metrics-1.17351>

3. Administration and guidance at the service of the researchers (C&C 23, 24, 34, 36)

The FWO will continue its efforts to put researchers at the center of its services. Optimal procedures for applications and evaluations, providing clear and useful information, optimal funding of the research and creating suitable working conditions for a diverse research population are central to this. Our customer-friendliness towards the researcher is made concrete by means of a correct and efficient handling of administrative processes, as well as incorporating the necessary flexibility. Both procedures and the eligibility and evaluation criteria for applicants must be transparent, so that it is clear to a diverse and international target audience what the conditions and standards for applications are.

The FWO also has the task of creating optimal conditions for its researchers. The FWO employs more than 800 postdoctoral researchers and offers grants to more than 1,300 PhD researchers. These numbers will increase in the coming years. Both postdoctoral fellows and PhD candidates carry out their research assignment at a Flemish host institution. The circumstances under which PhD candidates or postdoctoral fellows conduct their research are therefore determined by the host institution to which the fellow is affiliated.

The FWO attaches great importance to the psychosocial context in which its fellowship holders function. When PhD candidates or postdoctoral fellows experience problems, they are in the first instance dependent on the internal procedures of the host institution. Although the host institutions create the psychosocial context in which FWO PhD and postdoctoral fellows function, the FWO also has every interest in ensuring that its researchers can function in an optimal environment. The FWO currently has too limited insight into the psychosocial functioning of PhD candidates and postdocs.

The FWO will therefore try to monitor the psychosocial risks of its researchers in close consultation with the host institutions. If this monitoring gives rise to interventions, the FWO will take the initiative to discuss the measures with the host institutions. If necessary, the FWO can also act as a mediator, for example in conflicts with the supervisor. Although such conflicts that reach the FWO are limited in number, the impact for the person involved can be enormous.

Currently, in some exceptional situations, the FWO does not have the necessary tools to provide a solution in the event that mediation proves to be unsuccessful. The FWO will therefore develop a number of instruments to meet this problem. These instruments will be integrated within the FWO procedures and regulations, in consultation with the host institutions. These measures entail a sustained and even reinforced commitment to mediation between a fellow and the supervisor and greater protection by the FWO for the junior researcher.

Operational goals:

- 3.1 In 2020 a baseline assessment of FWO's perceived performance will be performed by means of a user survey. The findings of this baseline measurement are tested for applicability and included in the administrative process. (2020)*
- 3.2 The FWO regularly surveys the participants in its processes (evaluators, applicants, beneficiaries of funding) with the aim to detect and implement potential improvements. (2019-2023)*
- 3.3 The FWO will continue and improve its complaints and appeal procedures where desirable and possible. (2019-2023)*

4. Uniform approach across the panels of an application program (C&C 11, 14)

A uniform approach to the evaluation and selection procedure across all panels of a funding program will be actively pursued. In this way we try to avoid that each panel uses its own informal evaluation method. Such uniformity is important to achieve a fairness and just evaluation and especially crucial for the mandate applications, where a minimum of 10 percent of the available fellowships are allocated across all panels via a pool. In this pool, applications evaluated by different panels compete directly with each other.

Various actions are being taken to promote uniformity of the evaluation procedure across different panels. First, panels are composed in the same way within an application program. Each panel is composed of the same number of members who meet the same selection criteria. These selection criteria are described in the internal and external peer review regulations. In the composition of the panel, the input of the panel members is taken into account. This ensures adequate disciplinary coverage within the panel.

Second, uniform score grids have been introduced. These are used in all panels of the funding program by both the internal and if applicable external evaluators. Score grids form a reference and calibration framework for each evaluator. It sets out the different scoring options per evaluation criterion. The degree to which an application meets a criterion is linked to a score option that is identified by a concise score description. The score grids are made public when the call is opened so that candidates also have a clear view in advance of the evaluation method and criteria used.

A member of the FWO policy unit acts as moderator or administrative chair in all panels. One of the core tasks of the moderator is to monitor the uniformity of the selection procedure across the different panels by ensuring, in collaboration with the scientific chair, that the evaluation of the applications and the allocation of the scores are done in accordance with the predetermined score grid. The FWO staff members who fulfill the role of moderator consult regularly to ensure the homogeneity of their approach and jointly supervise the panels. Linking a staff member to one or more specific panels is avoided, each member of the FWO policy unit can in principle be responsible for each panel.

Operational goals:

4.1 The FWO carries out the new selection and recruitment procedure for the expert panels mandates and fundamental research projects. (2019-2023)

4.2 The FWO carries out the new evaluation procedure for the expert panels mandates and projects fundamental research. (2020)

5. Permanent evaluation of the review process (C&C 14)

Organizing and facilitating the review process of research applications is the core task of the FWO. Several changes will be introduced during the current policy period. A first in-depth evaluation of these reforms is therefore planned in 2020. Continuous evaluation of the internal and external review process will be of great importance in subsequent years. Although new large-scale reforms of the procedures are not an objective, the FWO retains the flexibility to further adapt and refine procedures where necessary so that the best possible application and review process can be facilitated. The process of external peer review for postdoctoral fellowships and fundamental

research projects is also monitored. From 2019 on, FWO will engage an external partner to provide these reviews. This process will be evaluated in 2020.

As part of the permanent evaluation of the review process, the FWO also plans an evaluation and reform of the structure and the number of expert panels for the fellowships and the fundamental research projects. These were last adapted in 2010 when the transition was made from the former committees to the current panels. However, science is evolving very quickly and new disciplines, renewed interdisciplinary connections and changing relationships between subdisciplines have emerged in recent years. In order to adequately reflect such evolutions in our evaluation systems, the current substantive structure of the panels (i.e. their scopes) will be reviewed. This process will start at the end of 2019. How to deal with interdisciplinarity will be an integral part of this exercise.

Operational goals:

5.1 The FWO carries out a thorough evaluation of the reforms of the review procedure for the fellowships and the fundamental research projects. (2020)

5.2 The FWO evaluates and reforms the panel structure for the mandates and the fundamental research projects, with particular attention to a more interdisciplinary approach. (2020-2021)

6. General attention to diversity (C&C 10, 27)

The FWO strives towards a fair selection procedure for all applicants, based on equal opportunities and with scientific excellence as the sole criterion to select applicants and their research. It is evident that researchers who deliver high-quality work or demonstrate scientific potential should be able to win fellowships or resources, regardless of philosophy, beliefs, origins or other scientifically irrelevant personal characteristics. The FWO realizes that this self-evident principle is not always automatically translated into reality. It therefore pursues an active equal opportunities policy, by including various family-friendly provisions in its regulations, by making the regulations sufficiently flexible in view of medical and social circumstances, and by applying specific measures for researchers with disabilities.

A transparent evaluation procedure is also an essential condition to guarantee equal opportunities of success for all applicants. The reforms that the FWO will implement in the coming years with regard to funding schemes and procedures are aimed at meeting this goal even better. Clear and uniform score grids, targeted information about gender and diversity for both applicants and evaluators, and of course a balanced composition of the evaluation panels are concrete working points to ensure sufficient attention for diversity throughout all levels of the FWO.

Improved monitoring of the results of application rounds is also a useful tool for quickly and appropriately adjusting our procedures and policy where and when necessary. Where possible and appropriate, the FWO also works together with its stakeholders and international partners. For example, it participates in research projects on gender in research, such as the European Science with and for Society (SWAFS) projects.

The FWO has already received the European Commission's "HR Excellence in Research" label for its HR policy. The EC has confirmed that it wants to give this label greater importance in the near future and FWO will therefore commit to adjust its gender and diversity policy where necessary.

Operational goals:

6.1 The FWO continues to strive for a transparent and fair selection procedure in which candidates are assessed on their scientific qualities and the quality of their research project, regardless of their background. (2019-2023)

6.2 Where possible and relevant, the FWO will collaborate in research projects or policy-oriented studies on gender and diversity in academia. (2019-2023)

6.3 The EC's HR Excellence in Research label will be retained and the HR policy will be aligned accordingly. (2021)

7. Offering transparency: from application to feedback (C&C 15)

During the previous policy period, FWO's ambition was to increase the percentage of applicants requesting feedback. It was also stated that a detailed description of the evaluation procedure for each funding instrument should be available on the FWO website, in order to increase the transparency of the decision-making process.

In the current and updated evaluation procedures we provide feedback to each applicant, regardless of whether an application is funded or whether feedback is requested. This feedback consists of the comments obtained through internal peer review and, if applicable, external peer review. By doing this, the FWO not only wants to increase the transparency of the procedure, but also wishes to get the most out of the efforts of the internal and external evaluators.

A basic requirement of transparent feedback is consistency. Since most evaluation procedures entail that several experts assess the same application and that each of them can do this from a slightly different framework, it is not always easy to obtain coherence in the feedback. Until now the qualitative feedback from the different reviewers has been passed on to the applicants in full, without taking into account any contradictions. In the future, a coherent report will be prepared for each application showing how the panel reached a final judgment based on the different, possibly conflicting, opinions of internal and, where applicable, external evaluators.

In addition to the qualitative feedback that an applicant receives, it can also be useful to gain insight into how an application relates to other applications from peers in terms of quality. Especially for grants and fellowships, the FWO finds it important that candidates can make a realistic estimate of their career prospects as quickly as possible. Insight into the relative positioning of a candidate compared to the other applications can guide the choice whether or not to submit a fellowship application for a second time.

Although a description of the evaluation procedure for each of its funding programs can be consulted on the website, the FWO currently has insufficient insight whether this offers enough transparency to its applicants with respect to the procedures. As the procedures are being revised, and therefore also the accompanying descriptions, it is an appropriate time to test the perceived transparency of the procedures with the applicants. If this assessment gives rise to adjustments, the available information will be adjusted. In any revision, a balance is always made between the degree of transparency on the one hand and the discretion that allows the experts involved in the evaluation process to function independently on the other. Internationally used standards serve as a basis for this.

The FWO will also develop a structural stakeholder consultation, in which a debate will be held at regular intervals with representatives from the research field, during which planned projects can be tested, feedback can be given with respect to current procedures and the performance of the FWO as a whole can be evaluated. The collected information can subsequently form the basis for policy adjustments.

Operational goals:

7.1 The FWO provides feedback to the applicant for each application. In order to increase the consistency of the feedback, a main evaluator is appointed for several programs who integrates the comments of the different evaluators. For the fellowships programs, the relative positioning of the application is also communicated to the applicant. (2019-2023)

7.2 The FWO sets up a structural stakeholder consultation. (2019-2023)

7.3 The transparency of the new procedures will be evaluated.

8. Requesting transparency: continued attention to scientific integrity (C&C 2, 3)

The FWO monitors international and national developments and responds to new evolutions when adequately performing its core tasks requires this. Together with the host institutions of its researchers, it continues to monitor compliance with scientific ethics and intervenes where necessary, all in line with the regulations and procedures it has set up for this purpose. For all aspects of the functioning of the FWO, it focuses on the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, as revised by ALLEA in 2017. This has implications for the research practice itself as well as the evaluation of new applications.

An important new point of attention for the coming years is mainly the connection between academic integrity and data management. Since 2018, the FWO has imposed a data management plan for research projects of all types. This obligation will also apply to FWO fellows as of 2020. A solid follow-up policy will have to guarantee that the data management plans, which are part of the assigned fellowships and projects, are properly implemented.

Operational goal:

8.1 The FWO monitors developments regarding academic integrity nationally and internationally and adjusts its policy where necessary. (2019-2023)

9. Preparing researchers for a later career (C&C 28)

In principle, the funding instruments of the FWO cover an entire research career, including the trajectory of early career researchers. However, the FWO identified two target groups that currently have difficulties accessing research funding. This mainly concerns researchers with several years of postdoctoral experience not funded by the FWO, who are looking for further funding. In addition, it concerns researchers who have recently acquired a position as independent academic staff and are looking for funding for a basic research project.

For the first group, the FWO is setting up a funding channel for senior postdoctoral researchers, which anyone with limited and recent postdoctoral experience can apply for. A separate funding channel for junior research projects will be created for the second group. The supervisor of such project should not have obtained his PhD more than twelve years ago. The success rate is the same as that of the senior projects.

The FWO also takes into account the diversity of research finalities - although limited to basic research - from the start of the academic career by differentiating between curiosity-driven and strategic research right from the doctoral grants. This attention to various research finalities should be supplemented with attention to experiences in various sectors when applying for fellowships and projects and when evaluating supported research. Taking intersectoral mobility seriously means that it can also be recognized as an added value for those who want to move from a company or other

non-academic environment to a research institution. This principle can apply to all stages of a research career.

Finally, in its communication, the FWO pays attention to the added value of a doctorate, both for potential employers and for the doctoral students themselves. The FWO helps to create realistic expectations for PhD fellows with regard to their career opportunities within and outside the academic world. After all, a majority of researchers will pursue careers outside the academic world. That is why the FWO is also investigating how it can facilitate the transition from the PhD to industry, for example through intersectoral mobility. Holders of a postdoctoral fellowship or a fellowship strategic basic research of the FWO are paid for three or four years respectively to conduct full-time research. In view of the objective of the PhD fellowship strategic basic research to train strategically thinking researchers, the possibility will be retained to carry out part of the research in a Flemish company. In this way an attempt is made to promote intersectoral mobility among fellowship holders. However, it should also be possible for the other fellowship holders to carry out part of the research activities in a company or not-for-profit organization during their fellowship.

In addition, the FWO will expand the options for suspension of the postdoctoral fellowship so that research can also be carried out at Flemish companies and not for profit organizations, where this is currently only possible in non-Flemish organizations. This possibility of suspension will also be brought to the attention of young researchers.

For the period after the postdoctoral fellowship, the FWO wants to support researchers in the transition to a non-academic work environment. In consultation with the host institutions, the doctoral schools of the Flemish universities and other partners in the Flemish R&I landscape, the researchers, the profit and not-for-profit sector, the FWO will investigate and possibly develop various options.

It is paramount in all these measures to promote intersectoral mobility that they should benefit all parties involved, i.e. both the researchers and the host institutions. Its administration is also kept as light as possible.

Operational goals:

9.1 The FWO continues to communicate about career prospects for young researchers. (2019-2023)

9.2 The current possibilities for intersectoral mobility will be maintained and even expanded for both pre- and postdoctoral researchers. These possibilities are communicated more clearly to applicants as well as fellowship holders. (2020)