

FWO - Where discoveries begin...

Giving wings to Researchers and their Careers

An HR Strategy for the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO)



Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek
Research Foundation – Flanders

0. Introduction and approach

This HR strategy document is the result of a consultation process both internally (among FWO staff members) and externally (among researchers in Flanders and in particular those funded by FWO). Following the initial meeting of the HR strategy group of the European Commission in September 2009, the first step undertaken was a “gap analysis” of FWO policies and procedures with respect to the 40 points of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, commonly known as “Charter & Code”. In the meantime, with the assistance of the Flemish Department of Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI), a comprehensive overview of existing legislation on all of the C&C points was made, in order to situate FWO with respect to the global situation in Flanders and Belgium.

As a next step, we joined forces with the Flemish Expertise Center on R&D Monitoring (ECOOM), who had just analyzed a survey for junior researchers, the results of which were published in 2009 ([Vandevelde et al. 2009](#)), and contained a wealth of relevant information on HR issues for researchers in Flanders. ECOOM was at that time also developing a new survey for senior researchers. They have been so kind as to partially reorient the survey in order to cover C&C topics. It is thanks to this survey, launched at the end of June 2010, that we were able to get a substantial input from the Flemish research community

Finally, the results of the gap analysis and the opinions of the researchers themselves were compared with the FWO policy plan 2008-2012, which defines the overall FWO strategy in this period, and which contains many relevant points for the HR strategy. On the basis of this comparison, a number of priority points were identified. Other items were situated on the longer term, and still others were discarded from the FWO strategy, since they were either not applicable to our situation as a funding agency in Flanders, or we did not have an impact on them.

The result is a synthesis between the ideals of Charter and Code, and the practical and legal imperatives imposed upon us in the Flemish and Belgian situation.

1. The existing legal and procedural framework

1.1. Flanders in general

All Flemish universities have signed Charter and Code, and are taking initiatives to implement them. Moreover, the University of Leuven has taken a leading role in the LERU (*League of European Research Universities*) document “Model code of practice” concerning research careers, and the Free University of Brussels (VUB) is a member of UNICA (*Network of Universities in the Capitals of Europe*) which has also done some work on research careers. In other words, there is a keen interest in these issues in Flanders.

As to the actual legislation, the analysis of existing measures and policies has shown that on many points, Flemish and Belgian legislation already provides excellent conditions for researchers.

For example, the decree on the universities in the Flemish communities has an extensive chapter on staff management issues. Also, there is a decree on equal opportunities (July 1, 2008) creating a framework for staff recruitment – both in the public and the private sector. Furthermore, Belgium has ratified the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (ETS no. 165).

Besides this general legislative framework, many specific measures have been taken in different funding agencies and research institutions which contribute to the implementation of Charter & Code.

In the following pages, we will examine how FWO can optimize its policies and procedures within its mandate by the Flemish government. Where possible, reference is made to one or more of the C&C items.

1.2. FWO, researchers and their careers

FWO has always had a strong interest in researchers' careers, since this issue is at the very heart of what we do, namely stimulate researchers to undertake innovative and ground-breaking research at all stages of their careers.

We have been actively involved in several national and European initiatives regarding research careers. A very important one among those is the ESF Member Organization Forum on Research Careers, which has recently led to the creation of a European Alliance for Research Career Development (EARCD). Likewise, we have collaborated intensively to the Flemish part of the national action plan (expected in 2011) in the framework of the European Partnership for Researchers, yet another initiative by the commission to stimulate awareness of the issues that researchers in the European Research Area are facing.

We have endorsed Charter and Code from the outset, and many of the points contained in the Charter and the Code are already standard practice at FWO. With this new HR strategy, we intend to take a firm step in the direction of eliminating some of the gaps that remain.

We will also be participating in a working group on research careers to be established in the near future by the Flemish Minister of Science and Innovation.

2. HR Strategy 2010-2014

2.1. Priority points

2.1.1. Internal selection procedures (C&C 14, 16)

FWO has recently completed a thorough reform of its internal selection procedure, by restructuring the existing selection panels and creating a specific panel for interdisciplinary research. In the near future, this reform will be evaluated and adaptations will be made where necessary.

An important issue in the functioning of FWO expert panels is the balance between quantity and quality of scientific output as a selection criterion. Almost half of the survey respondents think that the two are not well balanced, with quantity taking the lead. Given the fact that a majority of FWO postdoctoral fellows admit that their publication behaviour is (heavily) influenced by FWO selection standards, it will be necessary to reconsider these. The example recently set by DFG, where full publication lists will be replaced by short lists of three top publications per applicant, could prove useful in this respect.

2.1.2. A thorough reform of the external peer review system (C&C 14, 16)

An important issue in Charter & Code concerns the transparency and objectivity of selection and recruitment procedures.

Based on discussions in international fora, we can distinguish the following characteristics of solid peer review:

1. On the basis of scientific excellence and merit
2. Transparent
3. Impartial/independent
4. Confidential
5. Speedy and efficient
6. With a concern for ethical issues
7. Tailored to the specifics of the programme

On five of these seven points, FWO peer review procedures meet the international standards. There is, however, considerable room for improvement regarding criteria number 3 and 7.

Indeed, external referees are currently selected by the candidates themselves, which is an obvious potential source of bias, even though it is stated formally that the candidate should not consult the referee (or vice versa) about the content of the referee report.

As for criterion 7, this could also be improved, given the fact that all proposals are reviewed in more or less the same way, whatever the specific nature of the programme involved.

To tackle these problems, a reform of the peer review system will be initiated, whereby a compromise will have to be found between the principles mentioned above, on the one hand, and budgetary limitations, on the other hand.

A first point which has recently been decided on, is the selection of external referees. From next year onwards, the selection will be done on the basis of a list of 10 potential referees provided by the candidate, out of which we will contact people until we have at least 2 reviews per application.

The researcher survey shows that objectivity of selection procedures is a major issue for researchers. Also, it is a crucial point with respect to the international credibility of FWO as a funding agency of a high scientific standard.

2.1.2. Open recruitment and further initiatives to enhance internationalization (C&C 12, 13, 29)

Attracting more foreign researchers

Currently, about 8% of FWO fellows are non-Belgian¹. This figure has been rising steadily over the last few years, but it is still rather low. FWO intends to make a serious effort to reach a rate of *at least* 10% foreign researchers. This will be brought about mainly through a new programme, cofunded by the European Commission (Marie Curie), called *PEGASUS*.

This programme is intended to attract more foreign experienced researchers, who will be offered either a long fellowship of three years, or a short “visiting” postdoctoral fellowship of one year. This will provide the necessary flexibility for foreign researchers coming to Belgium. Ample career development opportunities will be provided for these fellows, in close consultation with the universities and research institutes where they will be working.

¹ On the other hand, we do not have figures on the staff employed on research projects funded by FWO. It seems that the percentage of foreigners is higher there, depending on the sector.

In this way, the PEGASUS programme will be complementary with our existing [Odysseus programme](#) which was designed to attract top level senior scientists (back) to Flanders. This programme was created in 2006 and has been extremely successful, as the first interim evaluation has clearly shown.

Of course, this programme will have to be monitored closely, and will require a sustained effort also after the cofunding period.

Internationalize Evaluation and Selection procedure

As for the internationalization of our procedures, FWO will continue to attract top experts as panel members. A new panel is envisaged with a stronger international composition to evaluate international collaboration proposals with substantial funding. Panel members will be recruited through an open call, which will be widely advertised.

2.1.3. Mobility: focus on more and especially better mobility (C&C 18, 29)

It has become commonplace to say that mobility of researchers is important. Indeed, the mobility requirement has become standard practice, especially for researchers at postdoctoral level. This also emerges clearly from the Senior Researcher Survey held in July 2010. Practically all respondents say they would consider going abroad for a certain period, or have already done so. However, the percentage of positive replies decreases as the duration of the proposed stay becomes longer: when asked if they would consider going abroad for up to one year, only one third of the respondents gives a positive answer – even though a large majority of them recognizes that international experience may be vital to obtain a permanent position in academia.

There is clearly work to be done in promoting international mobility among Flemish researchers. One of the main causes invoked for the reluctance to go abroad for a longer period are family-related circumstances: researchers often have families making it more difficult to plan a stay abroad. Targeted measures (cf. gender policy) may prove useful here.

FWO has a whole array of funding instruments to promote mobility, which are clearly evaluated positively by the researchers; more than half of the respondents to the postdoc survey indicate that there is sufficient funding available in Flanders for international mobility. However, the number of different instruments may be too large. The idea is to streamline these funding mechanisms in the near future, in order to optimize access to international funding mechanisms. For example, many exchange agreements exist with sister organizations abroad, but they all have different modalities, making it hard for the researcher to find his or her way through them.

A twofold approach is required here:

- 1) Examine the existing exchange agreements and check to what extent they correspond to the needs of our researchers. The agreements which do not satisfy this criterion will be discontinued.
- 2) Make wider publicity for those agreements that are useful, but currently underused due to a lack of awareness among researchers.

Moreover, we intend to adopt an “output-based” perspective on mobility: mobility should not be considered as an end in itself, but as a means to realize the goal of knowledge circulation. We will therefore consider procedures for more effective reporting on mobility outcomes (C&C 6: accountability).

2.1.4. Increasing the success rates (C&C 15)

Being a researcher is a competitive job. Resources are scarce compared to the number of applicants, and it is obvious that not everyone can get funding. However, if the success rates become too low, researchers get frustrated and will look for other opportunities outside Flanders, possibly creating a “brain drain” situation, and a decreased attractiveness of Flanders for foreign researchers.

Currently, FWO is struggling with extremely low success rates. For example, in 2010, the success rate for research projects is 13.9%, whereas an international benchmark shows that a success rate of about 30% is advisable.

This is unfortunate, since we do not want to lose through the back door what we bring in through the front door (Pegasus and Odysseus). Urgent action is needed. Logically, two approaches are possible:

- 1) Limit the number of applications
- 2) Increase the budget

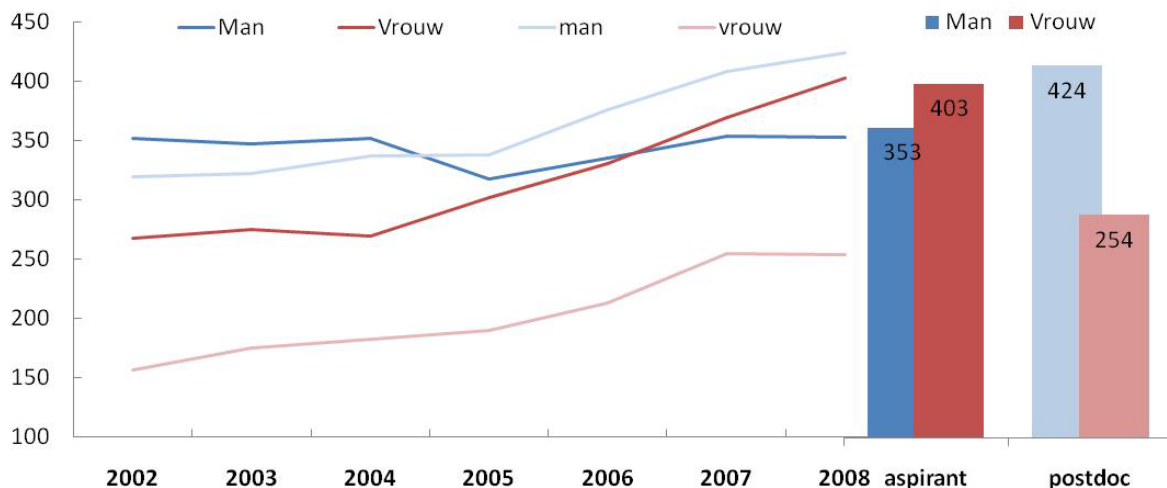
Measures are currently being adopted to tackle the first issue (maximum amount of research projects that can be applied for per researcher, maximum number of resubmissions for fellowships, etc.). For the second issue, discussions are ongoing with the Minister of Science and Innovation to limit budget cuts, and to let the budget rise again as soon as possible (in accordance with the Lisbon norm).

2.1.5. Gender balance (especially at the postdoctoral level) (C&C 27)

Gender policy has been an important issue in FWO policies for a considerable time. On the level of our fellowships, one gender-friendly measure was to grant female fellows one year extra per child (with a maximum of 1 year per fellowship term).

On the level of the experts in our selection panels, we have a guideline stating that maximally 2/3 of panel members can be of the same sex.

In spite of these and other measures, however, there is still a considerable gender problem. The percentage of female researchers has risen considerably at the predoctoral level, up to the point where we now have more female than male PhD fellows, but this changes dramatically at the postdoctoral stage, where women are underrepresented



No doubt factors are in play on which FWO policies do not have an impact. Still, we intend to look for ways to improve the situation.

Possible measures that could be envisaged are:

- Giving extra allowances to promote mobility for female researchers: especially the postdoctoral career phase coincides with the birth of children, possibly reducing mobility for female researchers which they badly need for their future career perspectives
- Giving priority to female researchers in case of equal scientific quality: when granting fellowships and research projects, gender could be taken into account as a secondary criterion.
- Ask applicants to give more detailed information on number of children, pregnancy leave, parental leave, etc., and take this into account when evaluating CV's.

2.2. Mid and long-term issues

2.2.1. Attention for career development and transferrable skills – more diversified career paths (C&C 14, 17, 38, 39)

As mentioned above, FWO is strongly aware of the need to provide attractive careers for researchers. The creation of the PEGASUS programme, cofunded by the EC, bears witness to this. The list of selection criteria for our PEGASUS postdoctoral fellowships will be extended to include quality of career development and career perspectives.

We will also monitor the selection and evaluation procedures, in order to make sure that candidates having been active in other sectors (e.g. industry) are not disadvantaged by a selection procedure based on (academic) excellence.

2.2.2. Collaboration with the private sector (C&C 18, 29)

FWO occupies a specific position in the innovation chain, which is in principle quite distant from industrial R&D.

Nevertheless, following the increasing trend towards so-called “public-private partnerships”, FWO tries to maintain solid links with the private sector.

Even if the research performed by our fellows and grant holders is not necessarily directly relevant for industry, FWO has an important role to play in convincing the private sector of the added value of researchers. Indeed, PhD degree holders are often considered to be overqualified but at the same time underexperienced to enter the job market. The private sector needs to be convinced that PhD holders are highly skilled knowledge workers who can offer substantial added value, even when employed outside R&D.

FWO will address this problem via two strategies:

- 1) Award scientific prizes in collaboration with large companies. This is both a career stimulus for the prize winners and an opportunity to speak to potential future employers
- 2) Convince private companies to co-fund FWO PhD fellowships. This system, which is already in place with a few strategic research centers in Flanders, would complement the “Baekeland fellowships” awarded by the Flemish Agency for strategic and applied research (IWT). Moreover, we already have experience with it in the framework of the L'Oréal fellowships for young female researchers (link with gender issues – cf. above).

2.3.3. Research ethics – research integrity (C&C 1, 2)

Ethical issues in research are a hot topic. The Flemish universities are gradually developing official bodies where violations of research integrity (plagiarism, etc.) can be reported and examined.

FWO was involved in the ESF Member Organization Forum on Research Integrity, which recently presented its final report, and is a member of the European Network of Research Integrity Offices (ENRIO).

Two initiatives will be taken here:

- Development of an ethical code of practice for research
- Examining the role of FWO in the establishment of an interuniversity advisory body which would have the role of a think tank, not a disciplinary committee

3. Low priority points

The Charter and Code clearly recognize the differential role of funders and employers in promoting attractive research careers. FWO, as a funding agency, cannot tackle all issues. Below are some points which are currently low priority in the FWO strategy, either because the Flemish situation makes them hard or impossible to realize, because FWO policies do not have an impact on them, or because we consider them to be less important in this first phase of the HR process.

3.1. Specific career tracks of researchers – career advice (C&C 28, 30)

As a funder, FWO can try to make sure that its researchers are optimally prepared for a career, either as senior researcher within academia, or outside academia (be it in a research position or not). At a certain moment, however, FWO funding for academic positions stops, and it is up to the universities and other host institutions to manage the further career of researchers (promotions, performance bonuses, career tracks, etc.). FWO cannot interfere with university policies on this point.

3.2. Portability of grants (C&C 29)

Although FWO has signed the so-called “Money Follows Researcher” principle and actively promotes mobility, portability of grants in the strict sense (the researcher does not stay attached to the Flemish host institution to which the research grant was initially awarded) is not feasible in the current Flemish legislative system, and was advised against by the Flemish science policy council in 2008.

3.3. Intellectual property rights (C&C 31)

IPR regulations are currently delegated to the universities and research institutions where our researchers work. Most of them have specific services (tech transfer offices etc.) to ensure adequate protection of intellectual ownership. There is consequently little reason to change this situation.

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