

# HR action plan 2024-2028

## Introduction

The 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 programmes 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. The 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 2024 to 2028 (full text available at <https://www.fwo.be/media/obxleap2/policy-plan-2024-2028.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 2028.

The FWO formulated four strategic goals, subdivided into 18 operational goals of which six are HR-related, that should be reached by the end of 2028. These six operational goals are presented below, accompanied by 16 specific actions that were derived from the strategy as well as a concrete timing for implementation. The actions should allow FWO to reach each respective operational 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) (14)

Director Administration (1)

Head of staff department (1)

## FWO HR strategy

The FWO has taken the lead in embedding various themes into research policy, such as: exploring the societal finality in the SB postdoctoral programme, the evaluation procedure and monitoring, a level playing field regarding gender and diversity, addressing cross-boarder behaviour and the mental health of young researchers in particular, greater attention to diverse research profiles and outcomes, diversity policy and creating a community.

### 1. Postdoctoral fellowships SBO

The FWO is introducing a new three-year programme for postdoctoral fellowships focused on strategic basic research, ensuring scientific excellence comparable to existing fundamental research postdoctoral fellowships. Since it is unclear how many researchers will shift from FO to SB, the programme will be launched and evaluated based on actual uptake and researcher needs.

To further strengthen the support for pre- and postdoctoral researchers, the FWO is also addressing major societal challenges. This includes **exploring a ‘societal finality’** component for the strategic basic research aspirant programmes, expanding the focus beyond the economic and technological value.

The FWO is also considering giving postdoctoral researchers the choice between fundamental research (FO) and strategic basic research (SB). The proposed postdoctoral SB fellowship would enable young researchers to further develop their expertise for applications in both industry and society. This initiative targets doctorate holders seeking greater scientific independence, especially those who currently lack a suitable framework to expand their skills in either strategic or fundamental research, as existing VLAIO fellowships are primarily focused on commercialisation.

Additionally, the number of **postdoctoral fellowships will be increased** to better meet the growing demand at universities and research institutions. There remains an unmet need for postdoctoral researchers who wish to conduct independent strategic basic research without financial involvement from companies or societal actors, and the FWO aims to fill this gap. At the same time, the FWO supports intersectoral mobility, enabling postdoctoral researchers to move between academia, industry, and government, thereby ensuring that academic knowledge is effectively applied within society. The total number of postdoctoral fellowships will increase from 269 to 300. This expansion requires an additional investment of €9.28 million at full implementation after three years, representing accumulated yearly costs. The expansion to 300 fellowships will be closely monitored to ensure optimal allocation and sustainable funding.

The expansion of the **‘second axis’** has created more space for diverse research profiles, allowing applicants to present a wider range of activities, results, and impact. This axis is now integral to all programmes, with expanded criteria emphasizing gender, diversity, and societal collaboration. Evaluators are supported by adapted scoring grids, clear guidelines, and targeted training to recognize diverse profiles and high-risk research.

**Operational goal 1.1.** The FWO offers a palette of opportunities that is clear and consistent. This will include exploring the possibility of a more complete offer for junior researchers and taking into account candidates with diverse profiles.

**Actions:**

- Applying the so-called second axis to the aspirant programmes. In doing so, the FWO takes into account candidates with diverse profiles, backgrounds and qualities, who may be selected not only on the basis of academic results but also on other relevant indicators. (GAP: 10. Non discrimination; 13. Recruitment; 14. Selection; 15. Transparency)
- Exploring the creating of a societal-impact component for the strategic basic research aspirant programmes, which are currently focused solely on economic and/or technological added value. (GAP: 1. Research freedom)
- Exploring whether a budget increase could be implemented to raise the number of postdoctoral fellowships from 269 to 300. This also involves examining whether it is desirable to revise the balance between junior and senior postdoctoral fellowships, or to adjust the duration of the senior postdoctoral fellowship. (GAP: 1. Research freedom; 21. Postdoctoral appointments; 25. Stability and permanence of employment)

## 2. Evaluation and monitoring

The FWO is committed to ensuring smooth and balanced application and evaluation procedures by continuously integrating new developments such as the *Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment* and *CoARA*. The organisation regularly reviews and adapts its processes, monitors support for various research types—including risky and breakthrough research—and experiments with innovative approaches, such as draws for closely ranked applications.

Application forms and interviews are designed to allow applicants to present diverse profiles and achievements, while evaluators are encouraged to fairly assess a wide range of talents. The FWO provides thorough feedback, streamlines information flows, and reviews the necessity of complete publication lists for balanced assessments. As an active member of the Coalition on Reforming Research Assessment, the FWO collaborates with partners to update evaluation frameworks and monitors the impact of its 'second axis', which broadens criteria for applicant activities and results.

Efforts are focused on eliminating bias, supporting lateral entrants, and ensuring fair opportunities for candidates from varied backgrounds. The FWO tracks success rates for applicants without a master's degree, works with universities to support promising candidates, and measures the impact of risky research to guide future adjustments. Comprehensive outcome measurement remains central to all reporting procedures.

Panel and reviewer performance is continuously monitored and adjusted. The FWO clarifies expectations for peer reviewers, balancing workload with validity, reliability, and transparency. Additional support is provided for specific requirements, such as academic results, utilisation

plans, and cross-institutional collaborations. Transversal themes like gender, diversity, bias, and knowledge security receive special attention and training.

Breakthrough research and the second axis are closely linked to team science, as collaboration and diversity of profiles help push boundaries. Interdisciplinary cooperation drives innovation and enables more efficient use of resources. This focus was reinforced during the **reform of the panel structure**, which included an interdisciplinary panel to review how interdisciplinarity is defined, assessed, and rewarded. Going forward, all panels will ensure that inter- and multidisciplinary research receives proper recognition.

FWO supervises and trains evaluators to ensure high-quality, balanced assessments, focusing on both the achievement of the 'second axis' and overall evaluation standards. Expectations for peer reviewers are clarified, and support is provided as needed, especially for assessing study results, utilisation plans, and cross-institutional cooperation. Key themes such as gender, diversity, bias, and knowledge security are addressed through targeted guidance and training. FWO systematically monitors evaluation quality, provides constructive feedback, and intervenes when expectations are not met. Efforts are made to maintain a well-balanced panel composition with sufficient expertise, including international representation, to cover all research domains effectively.

Finally, the FWO analyses its evaluation procedures and results to improve processes and promote equal opportunities. This includes comparing success rates for multidisciplinary, international, and cross-institutional applications with channel averages, and examining gender and other relevant indicators. By studying which applications are granted or rejected, FWO aims to understand panel behaviour and factors influencing success, such as research topic, outputs, applicant status, and interdisciplinarity. These insights guide adjustments to ensure fairness without categorising or biasing applicants. Collaboration with ECOOM supports this analysis, helping to refine policy and monitor the impact of cooperation dimensions.

**Operational goal 2.1.** The FWO ensures smooth and balanced application and evaluation procedures. This involves ensuring that the results of the 2019 reforms with attention to new developments such as the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) continue to be consolidated. In addition, the FWO measures the extent to which one supports different types of research (e.g., risky research) and what results this support leads to.

**Actions:**

- Monitoring new developments (a.o. in CoARA) and experiments (e.g. lottery). (GAP: Recruitment)
- Permanent monitoring of the so-called second axis in application and evaluation procedures (periodic surveys of applicants and evaluators, findings of policy officers, CoARA results, etc.). (GAP: 12. Recruitment; 16. Judging merit)
- We support panel members through tailored training and clarify our expectations with regard to peer reviewers. (GAP: 12. Recruitment; 16. Judging merit)

- Safeguarding success rates and providing support to pre-master applicants for a PhD fellowship. (GAP: 10. Non discrimination; 12. Recruitment; 14. Selection; 16. Judging merit)

**Operational goal 2.2.** The FWO supervises and trains evaluators in its evaluation panels. Both the achievement of the second axis and the quality of the evaluation work delivered (both per panel member and overall) are crucial here.

**Actions:**

- We develop an evaluation model for panel members and peer reviewers that allows us to intervene when expectations are not met. (GAP: 12. Recruitment)
- The FWO ensures a well-balanced composition of the expert panels. (GAP: 10. Non discrimination; 27. Gender balance)

### 3. Equal opportunities, diversity and inclusion

The FWO is committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion, focusing on underrepresented groups such as young talent with a migration background or lower socioeconomic status. Despite progress in gender equality and diversity, continued attention is needed. The FWO closely monitors and supports candidates without a master’s degree and collaborates with universities to maximize funding for young talent.

Eliminating all forms of bias is a key priority. **The FWO values diverse backgrounds**, including career changers from outside academia, and selects predoctoral candidates based on a broad set of indicators. Balanced evaluation panels ensure the necessary expertise across research domains, and FWO continuously monitors peer review quality.

The FWO tracks the **success rates** of multidisciplinary, international, and cross-institutional projects, adjusting policies as needed in collaboration with ECOOM. Gender and other relevant indicators are included in these analyses.

The 2021 **Gender Equality Plan (GEP)** is actively implemented, with targeted practices for non-traditional and minority groups. The FWO allocates resources, monitors data, provides training, and promotes work-life balance and gender equality in leadership, recruitment, and research content. Measures against gender-based violence are in place, and new diversity initiatives are launched as needed, inspired by international best practices.

The FWO will continue the **diversity policy**, raise awareness among researchers, and take initiatives where needed, learning from international practices. Building on gender equality and the GEP, the FWO will develop workable practices for non-traditional and minority groups, considering factors like ethnicity and socio-economic background to ensure a level playing field. The FWO also assesses the relevance of ethnicity and socioeconomic background, improves data collection with ECOOM, and explores anonymized evaluations, targeted outreach, and role models to further enhance diversity among supported researchers.

**Operational goal 3.4.** The FWO is further rolling out the 2021 FWO Gender Equality Plan (GEP) and developing good and workable practices considering non-traditional and minority groups among its (potential) applicants.

**Actions:**

- The FWO is committed to the further development and follow-up of the GEP, including a new monitoring report and particular attention to training panel members. (GAP: 10. Non discrimination; 27. Gender balance)
- FWO develops an Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) plan and implements it, including a.o. the rollout of a pilot project on pioneer fellowships. (GAP: 10. Non discrimination)

## 4. Mental and physical health of researchers

The **well-being** of researchers is also a key concern for the FWO. Whether it involves workload or relationships between different actors in the research environment. Therefore, the FWO coordinates with host institutions to safeguard researchers' mental health and to ensure appropriate behaviour, especially towards junior researchers.

The FWO prioritizes the **mental and physical health** of its researchers. It promotes research on mental health in collaboration with universities and ECOOM, and works with stakeholders to identify initiatives that improve well-being. Recent studies show mental health issues are significantly more common among PhD students than in the general highly educated population, with nearly a third at risk of serious problems. Since researcher well-being affects both performance and funding efficiency, the FWO is committed to addressing these challenges.

There is zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviour. The FWO maintains clear expectations for both junior and senior researchers, emphasizing responsible conduct by supervisors. Complaints are handled responsively.

Despite growing attention, quantitative data on researcher mental health remains limited. The FWO supports further research to track trends over time and across career stages. It also collaborates with host institutions and external partners to improve mental and physical health, and ensures knowledge exchange on concrete issues. FWO's approach is part of a general policy for all researchers, with clear agreements and open communication with host institutions.

**Operational goal 3.5.** The FWO places the mental and physical health of FWO researchers high on its agenda. It does this by stimulating scientific research on the mental health of researchers in collaboration with the knowledge institutions and ECOOM, and, together with the stakeholders, examining which initiatives it can take to improve the mental and physical health of researchers.

**Actions:**

- Raising awareness among promoters and supervisors of FWO fellowship holders about the issue of transgressive behaviour, through an updated profile of the good supervisor and the introduction of a training plan for junior researchers, to be drawn up by their supervisors. (GAP: 24. Working conditions; 36. Relation with supervisors)
- Exploring with ECOOM (<https://www.ecoom.be/en>) whether an additional study on mental well-being among junior researchers is warranted. (GAP: 24. Working conditions)

- Continuing to monitor whether cases of transgressive behaviour among junior researchers are being addressed adequately, based on the researcher survey. (GAP: 24. Working conditions)

## 5. Home of science

The FWO is regarded as an engaged and committed organisation, and we aim to maintain that reputation. In doing so, we carefully balance our role as a supportive guide with the researcher's own autonomy. We continue to collaborate closely with universities and other research institutions, which remain the primary point of contact for researchers' questions and needs. We periodically assess these needs through our online surveys of applicants, reviewers, and fellows. Complaints and appeals are handled in a transparent and efficient manner.

We are also reinforcing the FWO's openness by more clearly explaining the reasons behind certain rules and procedures. When researchers and other stakeholders understand how these measures contribute to strong research and funding policies, they are less likely to perceive them as administrative burdens.

Additionally, we are developing initiatives to strengthen our connection with specific target groups—for example, bringing together Odysseus grant recipients during a dedicated meet-and-greet at the FWO. Wherever possible, the FWO aims to become even more of a "home of science."

We will continue to communicate about the FWO, the research we fund, and our initiatives using a broad range of communication tools and formats. We are also exploring new approaches, such as concise visual overviews that highlight different aspects of our support programmes.

**Operational goal 4.1.** The FWO ensures that the distance between the FWO and its researchers is short. As a "house for science", the FWO develops initiatives to strengthen ties with the scientific community in the broadest sense, motivates its rules and procedures and deploys a diverse palette of communication tools and forms.

### **Actions:**

- Create a senior postdoc community to reduce the distance between the FWO and its fellows. (GAP: 24. Working conditions)
- Create a predoc community to reduce the distance between the FWO and its fellows. (GAP: 24. Working conditions)