



Ministry of Education, Culture and Science
I.K. van Engelshoven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science
PO Box 16375
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Subject: Integral plan 'to reduce pressure on the system'

Dear Minister Van Engelshoven,

In response to your letter *Vervolgstappen verlagen werkdruk en overheveling* ('Further steps reduce work pressure and shifting' (dated 18 July 2019), VSNU and NWO would like to inform you by means of this letter of an integral plan to reduce the pressure on the science system.

We are doing this within the framework and the boundaries that you indicate in your letter, primarily aimed at reducing the pressure on academics; however, this could potentially give rise to new bottlenecks. As we know, see also the previous letter *Overheveling tweede naar eerste geldstroom* ('Shifting from indirect to direct government funding') (dated 29 May 2019), the system also contains bottlenecks that can only be removed with additional resources, a better balance between direct and indirect government funding and by disentangling these two strongly interwoven flows of funding. This is a situation that we as a sector cannot change by means of the plan outlined in this letter. We would, however, like to remain engaged in a constructive dialogue with you, because we believe it is the only path towards a permanent solution for the widely perceived pressure on the system.

We envision positive change for the medium term, emanating from the new approach in recognising and rewarding scientists,¹ potentially in combination with the outcomes of the study on a new, less competitive funding system in secondary vocational education, higher education and academic research for the universities.² The measures proposed here aim for the sector to reduce the most urgent pressure in the short term. With this in mind, NWO and the universities will jointly implement a number of measures. They are actions that we deem necessary to reduce and control, in the short term, the application pressure and the considerable work pressure among academic staff, but which must be explicitly reviewed in connection with the positive effects in the medium term on the other vestiges of this of this integral plan.

Action plan for system pressure

In this plan, we indicate along which lines, and by means of which corresponding actions, we intend to reduce the pressure on the system. The design of our integral plan dovetails with the contours already outlined by NWO and VSNU in the joint letter *Overheveling tweede naar eerste geldstroom* (29 May 2019).

In it, we grouped the actions that we can implement into three interconnected strands: (1) a new balance in recognising and rewarding academics, (2) reducing and controlling the application pressure and (3) restoring the balance of direct and indirect government funding. It should immediately be noted that we do not address the third point in our action plan, seeing as its interpretation is tied closely to the outcome of the Weckhuysen Committee's advice, the findings of which will be published

¹ See position paper *Room for everyone's talent: Towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards for academics*, November 2019.

² Source: Cabinet letter *Opzet onderzoek toereikendheid macrobudget in het licht van de veronderstelde kwaliteit, doelmatigheid besteding en kosten(-toerekening)* ('Design of study on adequacy of macro-budget in light of the assumed quality, effectiveness expenditure and cost(-attribution)') (18 October 2019).



in January 2020. We will only advise about actions resulting from this advice after it has been published.

All of the joint measures that NWO and the universities want to implement are interlinked and part of a process to introduce improvements that need to be properly coordinated to prevent shocks and the shifting of bottlenecks. The preconditions that we set for the introduction of various measures are: a solid analysis of the impact beforehand, a well-considered mix of actions for each instrument and academic field, continuous monitoring and periodic assessments. We will devote specific attention in these to unintended side effects, such as the shifting of bottlenecks, an adverse effect on (gender) diversity (in particular when it is the result of a shift in 'academic housekeeping') and an adverse effect on the correlation between research and teaching. Indeed, experience shows that introducing measures such as those formulated in this letter generally yield the first quantifiable results after a period of two years. If these measures do not have sufficient effect in an acceptable period of time, or have undesirable effects, then this could result in us having to adjust, reduce or expand some of them where necessary, or introduce additional measures.

New balance in recognising and rewarding academics

The VSNU, NWO, KNAW, NFU and ZonMw are working together to achieve a new balance in the recognition and rewards for academics that leaves room for everyone's talent. Academics can excel in many areas, but thus far they have been primarily assessed based on research achievements. This puts disproportionate pressure on ambitions in the research domain. As a result, other core domains – such as education, impact, leadership and (for UMCs) patient care – are frequently undervalued. From now on, the universities and NWO (including ZonMw) want to look more broadly at academics' knowledge and expertise. The joint aim is to ensure that the recognition and rewards system is better suited to the core tasks of the knowledge institutions and that the appreciation academics receive is better aligned with society's needs.

Focus on quality

The assessment of academics will place less emphasis on quantity (such as number of publications) and greater emphasis on quality, content, academic integrity, creativity, contribution to science and/or society and recognition of the specific profile of the academic and domain(s) within which the academic works. We expect this to lead to more diverse and dynamic career paths and reduce the perceived workload.

Concrete proposals

In the position paper 'Room for everyone's talent: Towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards for academics' (see footnote 1) – which we presented to you on 15 November 2019 – the VSNU, KNAW, NFU, NWO and ZonMw make concrete proposals to make room for different academic talents and to recognise and reward academic work on all aspects that are relevant to our times. The knowledge and educational institutions will take up the concrete actions outlined in this position paper in the coming period. The complete plan is available as an annex to this letter. We would like to explicitly emphasise several concrete actions in it in the context of the present integral plan:

Redesigning academic career paths

- In 2020, the VSNU will develop a national framework for assessment, development and promotion, and implement the principles of the new recognition and rewards framework in a recalibrated university job classification system (UFO), which is to enter into force in 2021.
- Every university, as well as the KNAW and NWO in their capacity as research organisations, will appoint an institution-wide committee chaired by an academic at the professorial level with the aim of fomenting the discussion about the new recognition and rewards system within the institution. He or she will create support for the system and develop initiatives in a manner suited to the institution in question and that involves the various target groups in the process.



Each university, UMC and research institute will translate this national framework into institution-specific assessment criteria and narratives for all key areas and team achievements – all within the frameworks of the position paper.

Assess research and research proposals on quality

- Universities, UMCs and research institutes will set up programmes aimed at encouraging and supervising academics in their careers.
- NWO and ZonMw will create an array of funding instruments, with clearly differentiating criteria to serve a more diverse group of researchers. As different answers are possible to the question of what talent is, as well as to the question of what constitutes 'good' research, we will be discussing these questions with academics.
- NWO and ZonMw are working on the further implementation of DORA in their procedures and criteria. Among other things, this means that bibliometric publication indicators (h-index, journal impact factor) will no longer be requested and that the inclusion of research output on CVs and application forms will take on a more narrative character. Additionally, academics may be asked for a 'top 10' of impactful outputs rather than a complete list of publications. This will create equal opportunities for people who, as described above, have had a dynamic career path. Various pilots have already been launched that have taken these changes on board.

Reducing and controlling the application pressure

The entire sector is confident that the actions for a new balance in recognising and rewarding academics will have a positive impact on reducing the application pressure. In a culture where academics are assessed mainly on the basis of the quality of research proposals, this will help to reduce the total number of applications. Though it will be implemented in the short term, it will only fully mature in the medium term: indeed, this requires the current culture to change. In order to potentially remove urgent bottlenecks in the area of application pressure, the undersigned consider a number of additional actions necessary in the short term as well: given the current frameworks (see second paragraph of this letter) and a constant budget for science, reducing the number of grant applications is the only way to alleviate the application pressure. Without these measures, disproportionate demands are made on our academics, who spend a great deal of time writing proposals with little chance of success, as well as the evaluators. This applies to both NWO measures and measures taken by the universities. Indeed, universities view application pressure as a major problem that they, as good employers, want to solve by reducing the number of less successful applications: through their HR policy by recognising and rewarding, and by means of tailored measures for the short term and joint agreements with NWO.

Although the problem of application pressure is not a purely Dutch phenomenon,³ NWO and the universities see this as an extremely important point of attention in the context of the broader discussion about systemic pressure. Our starting point is that the time invested in submitting applications should be more in proportion with the rate of success. Previously agreed measures between NWO and the universities, such as the package that NWO gradually implemented from the autumn of 2017 onwards (including the embedding guarantee), are a good example of this. The first signs regarding the results of the overall package of these measures implemented by NWO suggest that a step has been made in the right direction. NWO and the universities will discuss the closing balance of this package in early 2020. The application pressure problem will not be resolved by this problem: new developments have occurred in the meantime, such as the implementation of the Dutch Research Agenda, the various calls of which generated great interest. The awarding of sector funding for science and engineering has had a positive impact on the number of academics with a permanent

³ The average success rate at ERC, for example, is 13%. See the speech from autumn 2018 by ERC president Jean-Claude Bourguignon: <https://erc.europa.eu/news/erc-president-speech-role-competitive-research-funding-science>



position, but they could also potentially increase the number of academics who are entitled to apply for competitive and industrial funding, including NWO grants. There is also the danger that the large number of new permanent positions as a result of sector funding in science and engineering will result in NWO receiving more applications. Indeed, in our previous letter we announced additional measures, which we will discuss below.

Measures that the universities intend to implement

The universities are going to encourage their employees to focus less on quantity (number of applications), and focus more on the quality of their proposals, for example by introducing diversity in the career paths of their academic staff. As part of this plan, the universities will work on a suitable 'mechanism', in line with what the universities have indicated they are going to do for career paths within the recognition and rewards framework. We propose the following, additional specific measures for reducing the application pressure:

- Less emphasis on funding applications in careers. In terms of promotion criteria, universities are going to attach less significance to applying and obtaining research funding, in particular for those whose career paths do not emphasise research. This ties in with a new balance in recognising and rewarding.
- More diverse career options for young researchers. The universities are going to give young academics, such as tenure trackers, more scope for development in the early stages of their careers. A combination of measures will make this possible, including exempting researchers from submitting applications and having the institutions offer start-up packages more frequently when possible according to their financial resources. This ties in with the new balance in recognising and rewarding.
- Strengthening the university research support services. Universities will strengthen the role of their research support centres. These centres play an important advisory role when it comes to limiting the number of proposals and encouraging well-considered, high-quality proposals. This also ensures that researchers do not exclude themselves for several years, based on the resubmission restrictions that NWO is going to implement (see below).
- Better information provision. Together, NWO and the universities will improve the provision of information to the research support offices by working towards a coordinator to handle submitted applications (similar to the LEAR role⁴) for each institution, who gains insight into the application made by that institution. Depending on the level of detail, however, that requires NWO to make a (substantial) investment in the necessary software and the universities to hire these people.

Measures that NWO intends to implement

NWO is going to stick to its chosen path with the current package of measures to reduce the application pressure and will continue to monitor its effects after taking stock of the final balance in early 2020. In addition to continuing with the already implemented measures, NWO will introduce a mixture of additional measures to limit the application pressure. In doing so, NWO will make optimal use of the (limited) room that it – and the universities – deems acceptable. One of the aims is to continue guaranteeing the quality of assessment within NWO's funding lines and also that the time invested in submitting applications will be more in proportion with the rate of success. The ultimate choice of measures will partly be determined by the nature of the instrument and closely aligned with the universities' parallel measures:

- Continuous submissions. NWO envisions fewer deadlines and working more often with continuous submissions. This will incentivise researchers by giving them more room to submit a proposal when it is 'mature'. This will prevent proposals from being submitted, under pressure of a deadline, even though they are not ready for it yet.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/applying-for-funding/register-an-organisation/lear-appointment_en.htm.



- Resubmission restrictions. NWO will introduce resubmission restrictions similar to the restriction system – familiar to the research field – used by ERC.⁵ As a result, applicants will carefully consider the right time for making a submission, and this includes NWO submissions. The role of the research support offices will thus become more important as well.
- Streamlining the instruments, communication and planning. With the implementation of the new strategy, NWO has introduced a more transparent set of instruments, which will make it easier for researchers in the long run to determine which instrument suits their proposed research best. Part of this streamlining is that NWO can announce at a much earlier stage in its communications when certain instruments will be made available and for which subjects.
- Multiannual (thematic) phasing. NWO will study the possibilities of introducing multiannual (thematic) phasing for the rounds for major long-term programmes. Ensuring a more balanced (thematic) spread/phasing over the years when developing a submission schedule for larger, long-term programmes (such as Large-Scale Research Infrastructure, Long-term Programming, Gravitation) will help to reduce the number of submitted applications at NWO. This will enable the field to spread their preparation activities for these large programmes more evenly.

Measures that require close alignment and further examination before implementation

Together, NWO and the universities are going to investigate what the impact of an application quota will be on further reducing application pressure. We will do this in phases for each instrument, in which the decision of whether or not to use quotas cannot be viewed separately from the goals of a funding instrument. A prerequisite for this study is that NWO must not shift pressure to the universities and that there should be a genuine reduction in the burden on researchers. Therefore, we will start introducing the above-mentioned measures, which in part will be absolutely necessary if the application quotas are to make a significant contribution in reducing systemic pressure. In concrete terms, this means we will investigate two measures:

- Quotas at NWO. NWO is considering the use of quotas in certain NWO instruments with particularly high application pressure as a potential addition to the above-mentioned measures. Similar to the Gravitation instrument, which has been using this system for years, this means imposing a restriction on the maximum number of (consortium) applications for each institution. This measure is envisioned for long-term programmes that require consortiums to be set up (including the Dutch Research Agenda). The details would need to be carefully worked out in consultation with the universities (and any other involved parties). The ultimate decision to use quotas cannot be viewed separately from the goals of the instrument.
- Types of preselection at universities. In order to implement the quotas set by NWO, the universities are investigating the possibility of using (types of) preselection for proposals or applicants. To enable this, a better information provision concerning applications is needed, the universities will share best practices, and will investigate with NWO how a smart, phased introduction of quotas can help to reduce the application pressure. Moreover, the nature of this preselection has to dovetail with and contribute to the talent recognition and rewards policy that is being developed by universities on diversifying career paths. In the medium term, this new talent policy can thus also be seen as a form of preselection.

Afterword

By acting together, the universities and NWO are highlighting the fact that together they wish to stand for the power of Dutch academia. The universities and the national research institutes lay a strong foundation for academic education and research, and NWO stimulates the quality of academic research by promoting healthy competition and (interdisciplinary) cooperation.

⁵ At ERC, resubmission is only permitted in the event of a high score A: score B restricts submissions for a year, whereas score C restricts submissions for two years. NWO intends to switch to a similar system.



By implementing these measures, which were carefully and collectively conceived, NWO and VSNU expect that we can constructively and effectively achieve the goal of reducing pressure on the system, which will simultaneously restore the balance between direct and indirect government funding. We thank you for your support, which will continue to be indispensable for that to succeed.

Yours sincerely,

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Chair NWO

Pieter Duisenberg
Chair VSNU