

Young Dutch researchers are very concerned: the reorientation of the NWO talent competitions threatens the future of Dutch science.

The NWO Veni-Vidi-Vici talent competitions are the pearls of Dutch science and have served as a source of inspiration for the establishment of the hugely successful European Research Council (ERC) in 2007. In the NWO talent competition, the best young Dutch scientists were selected on the basis of international scientific criteria and given the opportunity to start their own independent line of research. This system allowed the Netherlands to rise to the top 5 in world ranking for important science indicators¹, despite having a relatively small science budget. Maintaining this strong position is vital for recruiting and retaining (inter)national scientific talent and, by extension, for our knowledge economy, which will have to help solve future challenges the Netherlands face such as an aging population and climate change. In our view, it is therefore crucial that the Veni-Vidi-Vici talent competition continues to exist, is well funded and set up according to principles that best guarantee its objective of identifying and supporting the best and most innovative researchers.

Over the past 20 years, the Veni-Vidi-Vici talent program has undergone multiple changes. Initially, Veni-Vidi-Vici applications were only assessed on the scientific quality of the researcher and the proposed research. A radical change in this regard took place in 2009, when NWO introduced a knowledge utilization policy to ensure that new knowledge and insights from scientific research would contribute more directly to relevant societal issues. As a result, Veni-Vidi-Vici applications are not only assessed on the quality of the researcher (40%) and the research (40%), but are now also assessed for 20% on the social impact of the proposed research. In this way, the NWO Veni-Vidi-Vici system differs from, for example, the ERC Starting, Consolidator and Advanced grants, where knowledge utilization is not a criterion for funding. After all, the EU itself has established, based on research involving EUR 55 billion in research funding², that fundamental research selected for scientific quality has significantly more societal impact in the long term than research selected for direct societal or industrial relevance.

In addition to the emphasis on knowledge utilization, which is counterproductive in the long term, NWO has also made drastic changes in the assessment of applicants' CVs in the past two years. At the end of 2019, NWO, together with four other knowledge institutions (VSNU, NFWO, KNAW and ZonMw), introduced the so-called new Recognition and Valuation program. The aim of this program is to assess scientists not only on their research performance, but also on their teaching duties, team spirit, societal impact, leadership and patient care.

We endorse the importance of assessing academic professionals on such criteria, but we note a highly undesirable mixture of responsibilities. The assessment of the academic professional should be done by the employers (universities, research institutes) of researchers. Only on the basis of daily interaction can the academic professional be judged on these broad qualities. It is simply unrealistic to think that this can be done effectively by NWO committees based on a narrative CV (often a 'writing competition', easily outsourced to specialized agencies) and a 20-minute interview; let alone that a committee can subsequently rank candidates objectively and unambiguously on these subjective criteria.

NWO invests in research and will have to identify the best and most innovative scientists. If desired, an employer could nominate researchers for NWO research grants on the basis of Recognition and Reward criteria, but NWO's primary task is to assess the quality of a research proposal and of the researcher. And yes, there are good researchers and less good researchers. And yes, this is partly reflected in internationally accepted and measurable output indicators (such as total number of publications, total number of citations, h-index, and journal impact factors). Such indicators are not perfect, but it is extremely short-sighted to completely ignore them, as NWO is increasingly doing, when attempting to identify the best and most innovative research proposals. It will also isolate the Netherlands internationally: international referees will be less and less willing to assess NWO research proposals if they are not allowed to use the usual criteria for research quality. And young top scientists will avoid the Netherlands if their track record is not included in their weighting as a scientist.

Despite the negative developments regarding the assessment of the Veni-Vidi-Vici talent competition, we recently received a document (attached) from the Board of Directors of NWO which argues that the criteria and objectives of NWO talent competitions should be further amended and adapted to match the objectives of the Recognition and Reward program. Additionally, NWO proposes to only allocate NWO talent grants to researchers who have little chance at the ERC funding, and who do not have first-flow university funding in the form of a "rolling grant". In this way, the talent policy of the Netherlands is outsourced to Europe and the universities and is no longer based on the best merits of the applicants. This proposed cutback in the NWO talent policy is to supplement the insufficient budget of the NWO Open Competition.

This reorientation of objectives and criteria of the NWO talent competitions is of great concern to us. We wonder why cuts are being made on a successful program that is so important for scientific talent in the Netherlands. We therefore ask you to revert the Dutch talent policy to its original form and to expand the NWO talent program instead of restricting it.

In this context, but also more generally, we advocate the following principles.

- NWO simply subsidizes the best science and scientists in the Netherlands. Maintain all international science parameters that have made NWO an international success story.
- NWO competitions will receive sufficient new funds to award grants based on scientific quality.
- NWO is for scientific research, not for education, social outreach and leadership. This is a task for the universities and research institutes. Mixing assessment criteria is undesirable.
- The Netherlands should not become dependent on Europe and/or universities for its talent policy.

We hope that NWO and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will take our concerns seriously and act on them. We are at the start of our scientific career and would like to develop it in a country that is among the world's scientific top and that continues to offer

competitive funding structures to researchers who want to conduct pioneering research internationally.

Sincerely,

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