

Summary

Recruitment of research teams in projects funded by FNP under Smart Growth Operational Programme

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Warsaw, December 2017



Study

Promoting high standards in operation of research teams has been one of FNP's priority for years. The Foundation was the first institution in Poland awarded the *HR Excellence in Research* award as an institution implementing the rules of the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. Proper recruitment practices lie at the heart of programmes conducted by the Foundation since 2008 enabling funding of research teams. The basic requirements in this respect are stated in the programme documentation. In 2008–2012 the strategy for recruitment of team members was one of the criteria for evaluation of applications at the competition stage (TEAM, WELCOME, and International Doctoral Projects MPD). Under currently implemented programmes (TEAM, TEAM TECH, FIRST TEAM, HOMING, POWROTY/REINTEGRATION, TEAM NET, and International Research Agendas), greater emphasis is placed on active involvement of the FNP staff in recruitment of the funded teams. Foundation staff prepare sample forms for recruitment announcements, publish information on current competitions on the FNP website, and monitor the course of recruitments. Approval of the protocol from the recruitment is a condition for releasing funds to pay stipends and salaries.

The aim of this study was to analyze the challenges connected with recruitment in projects financed by the Foundation. We were particularly concerned about the interest in the competitions, especially in the context of researchers' mobility. We wanted to check to what

degree persons from outside the project leader's immediate environment, including persons from abroad, take part in the competitions. Another important question we tried to answer in the study was the degree of openness of the competitions. This had to do on one hand with the correctness of the recruitment practices, and on the other hand, with the results of the competitions. The final aim was to identify factors hindering the conduct of recruitment in a manner ensuring proper implementation of the project.

The study covered recruitments conducted by laureates of the programmes FIRST TEAM 1/2016 and 2/2016, HOMING 1/2016 and 2/2016, POWROTY/REINTEGRATION 1/2016 and 2/2016, TEAM 1/2016 and 2/2016, and TEAM TECH 1/2016 and 2/2016.

A combination of research methods was used. In the first stage, recruitment protocols submitted by laureates were analyzed. In this instance, all available documents (as of September 2017) were used, submitted by 67 laureates (not all of the laureates had submitted the relevant protocols). In total, data was gathered concerning 1,174 announcements of recruitment competitions. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 18 randomly selected laureates of competitions. The information obtained in the interviews was used to construct a questionnaire survey which the other 56 laureates were invited to participate in. Responses were received from 30 of them (53.6%).

Key results

In light of the information from the interviews and the questionnaires, it may be said that FNP's guidelines for recruitment seem reasonable, clear and understandable, and do not cause problems for laureates in complying with them. Difficulties occur practically only in the case of recruitment of doctoral students, which is connected with the rare periods for recruitment for doctoral studies¹.

The laureates generally don't sense interference in the recruitment process from the institution where the project is carried out. The level of salaries, which under the rules for FNP programmes are relatively high and usually higher than the typical salary at the institution, sometimes leads to certain controversies. Most of the respondents said however that their institutions either do not interfere with the proposed level of salaries (56.7%) or do so rarely (26.7%).

The amounts of salaries and stipends suggested by FNP are regarded as very high (53.3%) or rather high (40.0%). A few respondents regarded the amount as average (6.7%). Those who regard the salaries as average are comparing them to salaries in business or in Western Europe.

¹ The study was conducted before the new regulation „Law on Science and Higher Education” of 2018 was introduced, which entailed new concept of doctoral schools.

Interest in competitions

Despite the attractive financial and research conditions offered in projects, recruitment of a good team can prove hard. Only 12.5% of respondents stated that “many good candidates responded to their announcement of recruitment for a position” for a doctoral student or postdoc. In the case of recruitment of undergraduates, only 10.0% of respondents said they got many good candidates. Most of the respondents said that while “many applications are received, they are generally of low quality and it is hard to find the right person”.

In accordance with the programme documentation, announcements of competitions for recruitment of team members were published on the FNP website, and in the case of competitions for doctoral students and postdocs, also on the Euraxess website. Other recruitment channels were also used (e.g. the institution’s website, industry sites, journals). According to the laureates, the most important role in seeking team members was played by the “grapevine,” i.e. word of mouth among acquaintances from the community. This method was used by 86.7% of respondents. The effectiveness of announcements on the Euraxess portal received mixed reviews. The respondents often pointed out that Euraxess can reach a huge number of candidates (and in this sense is effective), but often they are random applicants or clearly weaker than those from other sources.

The most candidates were attracted to competitions for positions for doctoral candidates and postdocs (5.9 persons per position). The least interest was shown in recruitments for undergraduates (2.8 persons per position) and technical staff (2.9).

Interest in competitions did not depend on the programme, and thus the scale of the projects and position of the project leader. The most applications were received in the recruitment for teams in the TEAM programme, which assumed great research experience on the part of the team leader. But the most people were also hired in the TEAM programme, so overall the number of applications per position in this programme did not differ from the other programmes. Significantly fewer persons were interested in participating in projects funded under the POWROTY/REINTEGRATION programme, carried out by postdocs returning to scientific work after a break connected with parenthood or work outside of science. The great variation in the sample in terms of particular variables did not allow an analysis of the influence of the institution on the number of applications.

A number of competitions (14.8%) was noted where only one person applied. There was an even greater number of competitions (20.2%) where the number of applications equalled the number of employment positions offered.

Foreign candidates

Candidates affiliated with Poland predominated in the competitions (40.0%). Applications from abroad were most often received from Asia (17.4%) and elsewhere in Europe (14.3%). Applications from other European countries most often came from Poles who wanted to return home after spending some time studying or conducting research work abroad.

Persons from Asia and the Middle East who had studied or worked for some time in European countries also accounted for a large group. Interest in projects financed by FNP on the part of foreign candidates increased at later stages of their career. Candidates from Poland filed 73.0% of the applications in competitions for undergraduate stipends. In competitions for doctoral stipends and for postdoc positions, they accounted for 33.0% and 28.0%, respectively. Among candidates from Poland, women were represented in equal numbers to men, but among candidates from other countries many more men applied.

Most of the persons accepted (70.7%) had previously been affiliated with Poland. It should be pointed out, however, that a portion of the persons hired were Poles returning from abroad. Based on their surnames, we estimate that 87.6% of the persons hired were Poles. This estimate may be confirmed by analyzing the list of recipients to whom FNP is already paying stipends. It includes only undergraduates and doctoral students (not postdocs or technical staff), but the ratio of Poles to foreigners is similar (9:1).

In total, 10 people out of the sample studied (i.e. 33.3%) hired foreigners. Another 7 people, i.e. 23.3% of the sample, did not hire foreigners under their current grant but had done so in previous projects. This means that over 40% of the laureates never hired foreigners.

The declared attitude to hiring foreigners was positive. Most of the respondents agreed with the statements “A foreigner on the team contributes new knowledge and other methods of operating. That has a positive impact on the work of the team”; “A foreigner on the team bring contacts that in the future will facilitate international cooperation”; and “Groups hiring foreigners are perceived as more prestigious.”

At the same time, however, respondents expressed the belief that Poland is not perceived as an attractive country for pursuing research, and consequently, “Really good people do not apply here, even if they are offered good conditions and interesting scientific challenges.” They also often stated that applications from foreigners were not thoroughly prepared, e.g. did not contain all the required elements or were not suited to the topic of the project.

In interviews, the subjects quite openly discussed their concerns connected with hiring foreigners. These primarily involved problems with bureaucracy as well as cultural differences.

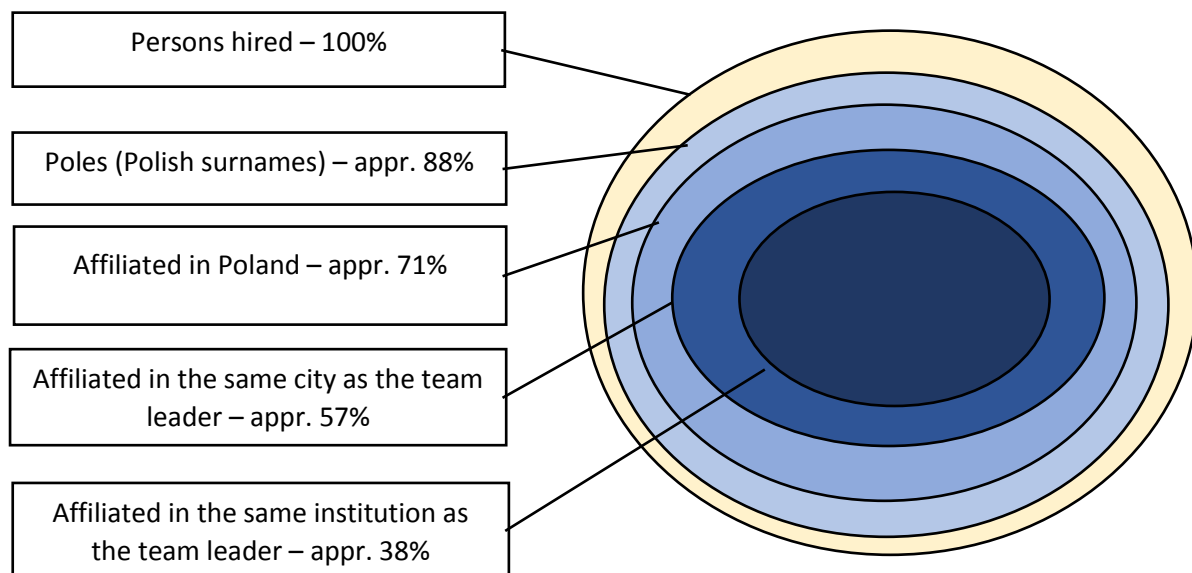
Predictors of success

Those who did best in the competitions were Poles as well as candidates affiliated with the same city and the same institution. Over half of the persons hired had previously worked in the same city, and 38.0% at the same institution. Across every type of competition, the proportion of candidates close to the laureates (Poles, and persons affiliated with the same city or the same institution) was significantly higher among candidates accepted than among candidates rejected. This means that an affiliation close to the project leader contributed to success in the competition. The trend of hiring candidates from the

immediate surroundings was maintained at all types of positions, even though it might have been expected that differing degrees of mobility would occur at different career stages. The ratio of women and men among competition winners for various positions was very similar, and there were no evident differences here between the sexes. To better understand what factors predicted success in the competition, a logistic regression was conducted. It was found that the candidate's sex was irrelevant, as was the fact that one had been affiliated with Poland. What was relevant, however, was whether one was a Pole or had been affiliated with the same city as the laureate, or affiliated with the same university or institute as the laureate.

This does not necessarily demonstrate preferential treatment of "our own" candidates. It could for example reflect actual differences in the quality of the candidacies (the candidates' scientific level was not analyzed in the study). Nonetheless, the small proportion of "outsiders" among the selected teams must be noted.

The diagram below depicts the share of "outside" candidates among persons selected in recruitments.



Are the competitions truly open? There are at least three grounds that raise doubt on this issue. Apart from the clear imbalance in the results, in favour of Poles and persons closely affiliated with the laureate, concern is generated by the fact that in 19.0% of the competitions, the number of applicants was precisely the same as the number of positions proposed, and all of the applicants were hired. Another concern may be raised by the time indicated by the respondents as necessary to conduct the recruitment: from announcement of the competition until the person hired began work. This ranged from 3 to 30 weeks, primarily depending on the type of position. It seems natural that undergraduates would be recruited the fastest, coming as they typically do from the same city where the grant is realized, which greatly facilitates the start of their work. It is a greater challenge to bring in

a doctoral student, and even greater, a postdoc. The competitions must have an international scope. The persons recruited may come from different countries. If they come from outside the EU, issues of visas and permits may delay their arrival. Often other obligations enter into play, and sometimes it is necessary to wait for their completion. Considering this, it is surprising that there are cases where just 3 or 4 weeks pass between the announcement and commencement of work by a doctoral student, and particularly a postdoc. Moreover, the median of 10 weeks for postdocs and 8 weeks for doctoral students suggests that in practice, in many instances persons from the laureate's immediate circle are chosen.

It should be stressed that none of the aforementioned grounds demonstrates irregularities in conducting competitions, in and of itself. Each of these situations may happen to coincide with the fact that the selected candidate had the best qualifications to perform the work .