

Summary

Survey of the laureates of the FIRST TEAM programme

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The study was conducted in order to investigate the professional development of the FIRST TEAM scheme laureates, including the impact of the FIRST TEAM grant on their skills, career progression and future career plans.

FIRST TEAM funding scheme is aimed at PhDs at early stage of their careers (those who have had a doctoral degree for no longer than 5 years) and it aims to support these young PhDs in establishing their first research groups. The programme also aims to attract researchers from abroad to Poland (including the return of outstanding scientists of Polish origin). The programme supports research projects lasting up to 36 months.

This study was an online survey. The anonymous questionnaire included a set of questions related to opinions regarding the FIRST TEAM funding scheme, research work conditions, current work status, future job plans and support that laureates would like to receive from the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP) at this stage of their research careers. 50 Polish laureates of the programme received an email inviting them to take part. Among 49 people who received the invitation (one incorrect email address), 39 completed the survey (80% response rate). 25% of the respondents were female and the respondents' age ranged from 35 to 44 years (average age 40 years). There was the highest share of respondents representing physical, Earth and life (natural) sciences (64%), then science and technology (26%) and the least frequently medical and health sciences (8%). In terms of career stage, 28% hold the doctor hab. title, 31% are associate professors and 5% are professors. 95% of those surveyed work in a research institution.

Key conclusions

The majority of those surveyed perceived the FIRST TEAM funding as an important factor in their professional development and reflect that it would not have been possible to achieve this career stage they are currently at without the funding, even when other funding options would have been considered. Qualitative answers to open questions report that other funding options available to first stage/recognised researchers, do not offer comparable opportunities to establish a research team. The FIRST TEAM research programme appears to be unique because of its prestigious character and attractive financial terms, which in turn translates into possibilities of developing international collaboration and strengthening own research position.

The three most commonly lessons learnt while conducting FIRST TEAM projects were: research team management skills, experience in supporting young researchers and experience of managing research projects. Almost all reported that their competencies in these three areas have increased. Majority of respondents felt that the following have improved/increased: their grant management skills, knowledge and skills related to their research area and prestige and being recognised within the research community. Over half of those surveyed reported considerable influence of the funding on their research collaboration skills and increased job security. To a lesser degree, the FIRST TEAM contributed to increased international collaboration and improved skills related to collaboration with business partners. Undertaking of the projects within the FIRST TEAM was also associated with some challenges. These concerned mostly research administration and recruitment and managing of the research teams. Additional obstacle was COVID pandemic which brought along difficulties such as accessing research facilities, coordinating of the research team, as well as research administration and research related procurements.

A particular challenge was recruiting and managing research teams. FIRST TEAM laureates who were ready for new research challenges often found it difficult to recruit suitable research staff who would be motivated, competent and interested in research work. Difficulties were also related to enforcing the research tasks, motivating team members and resolving work conflict within the research team. Laureates appreciated the support offered by the Foundation in these aspects and they recommend that these initiatives are to be continued or even intensified. In addition to training courses, respondents would find mentoring and networking with other FIRST TEAM laureates helpful.

Research administration was also commonly reported as a barrier to project completion. Funding offered by the FNP is perceived as complex in terms of research administration compared with funding from different funding bodies. Although the difficulties related to the research administration are associated with the level of support received from the laureate host institution, there has been suggestions made by respondents, that the FIRST TEAM scheme might be too burdensome in terms of administration for newly established researchers. According to the respondents, host institutions are also culpable of challenges associated with grant/research administration. Procedures that need to be followed when recruiting postdoc are perceived to be overcomplicated, and according to some of the respondents, the host institution was not component in this regard, and in some cases even hostile. This gives rise to a recommendation to simplify the grant administration process and to verify whether host institutions are competent and have suitable (not overcomplicated) procedures in this respect. This also echoed in a suggestion that those applying for research funding should check carefully prospective host institutions'

procedures, and while selecting the host institution, take into account not only whether the institutions is well-recognised and prestigious, but also how the institutions works in terms of research organisation and research management.

Work conditions

Almost all of the respondents have experience of working in a research institution abroad (72% of them have spent abroad 2 years or more). Therefore their views regarding academic work conditions shared in this survey are presented in the light of the work experience abroad. In most cases, the respondents considered whether to stay abroad. The decision regarding the relocation to Poland was often made due to personal/family circumstances, but these were also often coupled with a perspective of obtaining a stable job and a prospect of research development in Poland.

Over half of the sample felt that receiving the FIRST TEAM funding has affected their decision to relocate to Poland and conduct research here. Other respondents relocated to Poland before the FIRST TEAM funding scheme was established, but other sources of funding such as HOMING Plus or Polonez NCN directly influenced their decision to come back. Some respondents, who returned to Poland some time ago, felt that FIRST TEAM encouraged them to stay in Poland.

Given the time perspective, the vast majority of respondents are satisfied with their decision to return to Poland, but at the same time, they indicated that the time spent in Poland to being with, was difficult. This included disappointment with how the work is being organised (work culture) in Polish research institutions. The comparison between work conditions in Polish research institution and abroad is not in Poland's favour. However, it is important to emphasize that those surveyed had experience of work at (often) top research institutions in the world. The least favourable comparison for Poland is in terms of host institution support for research projects; quality of scientific debate, seminars etc.; pay level; knowledge transfer and commercialisation; and knowledge transfer between research teams. The availability of research funding and possibility of international collaboration have been ranked equally. No areas where Poland would perform better compared with research institutions abroad have been indicated.

Responses provided to questions regarding barriers/challenges to research career development mirror in large extent conclusions regarding the comparison of work conditions in Poland and abroad. However, the key issue here is job insecurity, followed by lack of time to conduct research and researchers being overburdened with other academic tasks such as teaching. Low salaries, even though not rated as one of the top barriers, becomes increasingly important when some of the barriers are examined simultaneously. In this perspective, lack of time to conduct research/overburden with other research tasks, followed by quality of academic environment/research of poor quality; poor research institutions management; overreliance on grant funding and job insecurity are the main barriers.

It appears that job insecurity has a number of meanings for respondents. On one hand, it has been indicated as an important barrier affecting career development in academia, on the other hand, according to many respondents, job insecurity is not only a natural, but also a desirable feature of a research job. Some also express views that job insecurity in Poland is much lower compared with

many other countries, and according to some, job insecurity is too low, and it results in lower motivation of researchers and as a consequence, poor academics are offered jobs in academia. While some of the respondents appear to appreciate relative stability of their academic employment in Poland, others tend to perceive this as a fault of the Polish academic system. Respondents emphasize that job security should be related to work achievements – those who have a large contribution into science, should have their efforts appreciated and rewarded with stable work conditions. In this contexts, key aspect related to job security is a lack of adequate scheme to review academic job performance. For others, job insecurity is not related to the stability of employment nor the type of contract, but to offered salaries- these tend to be low in academia and researchers tend to be dependent upon grants that may go towards their salaries. Additional issue is high instability of the funding opportunities (the volatility of the resources granted and the volatility of the funding probability) that may deter researchers from academic work.

Current job satisfaction varied according to its different aspects. Three quarters of respondents get satisfaction from opportunities for personal growth that their research offers. Many respondents tend to appreciate work conditions and feel comfortable in their job (75%) (e.g. positive relations with work colleagues). Respondents were in general satisfied with access to research facilities. The relationship between the workplace and work-life balance experienced by researchers was also positively rated. More negative views were expressed relating to collaboration opportunities outside of the academia and commercialisation of research results, as well as administrative and technical support offered by host institutions. The qualitative feedback indicates that high levels of satisfaction with work conditions were in part due to the FIRST TEAM funding.

The study revealed a number of uncertainties regarding the mechanism of success in a research job. Key factors that account for academic success are not always aligned with factors that appear to be crucial for progression in scientific knowledge. What appears to be import for scientific knowledge progression as well as for academic career progression are: ground-breaking publications; international collaboration; collaboration with prestigious research institutions and academic mobility. Important differences are observed for publications in high impact journals, that are important for professional career development, but do not tend to accelerate the scientific knowledge. What seems to be important for progression of science, but not individual career development are: publishing negative results; sharing of (raw) research data; popularisation of science (dissemination of research findings); interdisciplinary collaboration and study replication.

Next steps

The vast majority of respondents would like to continue work in an academic institution in the future. Despite the critical remarks regarding higher education system in Poland, respondents in majority would prefer to work in Poland or to combine work in Poland with work abroad. To some extent, these preferences are related to their personal and family circumstances (the family would prefer to stay in Poland) as academic work in large institutions abroad is something that respondents would prefer.

The most frequently discussed source of support that respondents would like to receive were more research funding opportunities. In particular, funding schemes like TEAM (offered by FNP), that

would enable research teams to be funded, develop and grow. Some of the respondents compare these to the ERC funding structure where the FIRST TEAM would be aligned to the ERC Starting Grant, while the next funding would be equivalent to the ERC Consolidator grant. There was also a suggestion that providing time extensions would allow chief/principal investigators to keep the doctoral students until they complete their doctoral training and obtain a PhD. It also difficult to complete a research project within three years given the time needed at the beginning of the project to recruit the research team.