Summary

Young researchers from foreign countries, in projects funded by FNP, under Smart Growth Operational Programme Measures 4.4 and 4.3

Marta Łazarowicz-Kowalik, Aleksandra Czerniawska

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Aim of study

One of the key aims of the Foundation and the programmes it implements, under measures 4.3 and 4.4 of the Smart Growth Operational Programme (SGOP), is to increase the competitiveness and internationalization of Polish science. A fundamental requirement for funding of projects, is the process of open recruitment competitions, accessible to persons from all over the world.

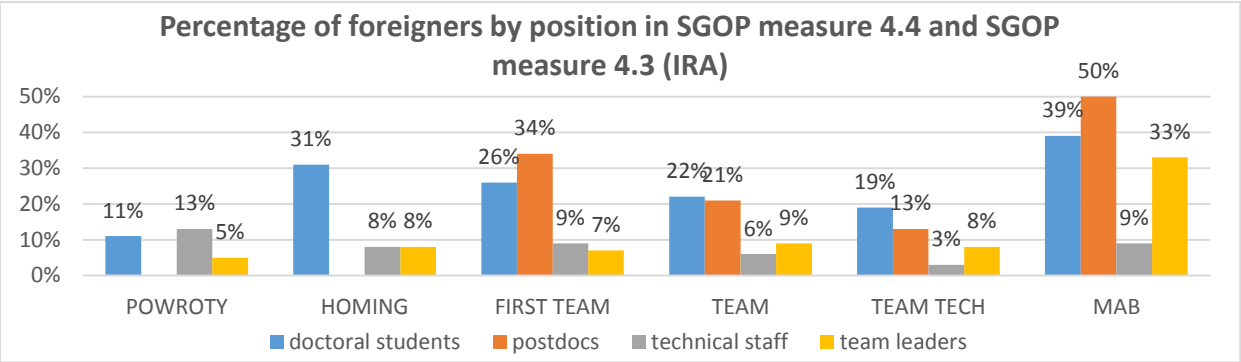
This study examined the experiences of foreigners, recruited by team leaders to work in projects supported under the programme, and their opinions on their situation in Poland. The objective was to identify barriers limiting access, as well as the appeal of research work in Poland and to formulate recommendations to make the country more attractive to foreign researchers.

To answer these questions, the following types of analysis were conducted:

- Quantitative analysis of foreign researchers' (Respondents) participation in teams, recruited for projects funded by FNP under SGOP Measure 4.4 (as well as 4.3)
- Qualitative study of the Respondents, taking part in projects (four group interviews, involving a total of 32 Respondents, working in Warsaw or Cracow)
- Quantitative study of Respondents, taking part in projects (online survey distributed to 106 persons, with a 52% response rate).

Key conclusions from study

Relatively high numbers of Respondents were employed in projects, at 14.7% (149 of 1,012 individuals) in all grants for SGOP Measure 4.4, and 33.2% (66 of 199) of persons employed in grants for SGOP Measure 4.3 (the International Research Agendas programme). The number of Respondents hired for specific programmes under SGOP 4.4 were: Team - 57, First Team - 46, Team Tech - 23, Homing - 17, and Returning/Reintegration - 6.



Reasons for coming to Poland

The Respondents, who joined FNP projects, generally knew little about Poland and typically had no prior experience of living in Poland, or cooperating with Polish scientists. Their main reasons for coming to Poland, were the opportunity to take part in a particular project, as they had specific interest in the subject of the study, as well as the research accomplishments of the team leaders and the opportunity to work with them. For many of the Respondents, Poland was not regarded as a recognized location on the scientific world map. For some, in particular, those from outside of Europe, Polish membership of the EU proved decisive.

Most of the respondents had no clear idea of what to expect as regards the conditions for research work and life in Poland, this was often based on random reports or stereotypes. These opinions were often unfavourable, and resulted in surprised reactions of the Respondents as to the high standard of infrastructure and conditions for research work, as well as the quality of research being conducted. As the Respondents themselves put it, Poland seems “highly underrated”. None of the opinions they had previously encountered conveyed the strong suits and benefits of doing research work in our country.

Satisfaction from involvement in project

The overall assessment, regarding the decision to come to Poland, came out clearly positive, in both, the qualitative and quantitative studies. The most important advantage of living and working in Poland, proved to be the opportunities for research and for scientific career advancement. For the Respondents, coming to Poland had a very specific objective: to gain experience and research attainments, that would further their scientific careers. They had clear and uniform expectations associated with their stay: the Respondents were hoping for quantifiable benefits, such as results in the form of publications and international recognition. There is a clear correlation between the attainment of these goals and the Respondents’ satisfaction resulting from participation in their corresponding projects. The qualitative and quantitative studies confirmed this. They also rated very highly, the competencies of their team leaders, as well as the level of involvement in networks of international cooperation.

One measure of their satisfaction, was that the clear majority of the respondents, would recommend their research team to other researchers as a good place to work. They were more cautious, however, in their ratings and readiness to recommend the research institution. Their own observations and contacts with other researchers, inclined them to believe the group, which they themselves had joined, stood out clearly against the background of the overall Polish academic environment. With respect to recommendation of Poland, as a country to pursue research work, the responses were somewhat more sceptical, nonetheless, still positive.

Barriers

Despite a very good overall assessment of the projects they participated in, as well as satisfaction with the cooperation with their team leader and the rest of the team, the Respondents identified a number of barriers, hindering their functioning in the Polish academic environment.

Residence permit

Formalities connected with their stay, were unanimously rated among the greatest difficulties encountered, effectively discouraging potential researchers from working and studying in Poland. This primarily concerns short term residence permits (generally 6 months), the procedure being extremely unclear and time-consuming. Not only is it perceived as a waste of time, inconvenient and stressful, but most importantly, it substantially limited the Respondents' mobility. These reasons are sufficient to generate serious doubts among potential researchers, as to whether Poland is the right choice as a place to study and conduct research.

Language problems

The Respondents' problems were not limited to issues regarding formalities. Many of them pointed to the low level of internationalization of the Polish scientific community, and particularly, the institutional lack of preparation for international cooperation. Language difficulties pose a serious problem, as a result, only a third of the respondents felt fully included in communication within their groups. Nonetheless, communication and relations within the groups were rated very highly. Communication outside the groups was rated much worse, even within the same research institution. Typically, administrative matters in English were a challenge, but the main source of difficulties was documentation and everyday email communication within the institutions, which is typically conducted in Polish. This caused many of the Respondents to feel isolated and helpless.

Some of the institutions hosting foreign researchers assume part of the responsibility for arranging their stay in Poland, for example, by establishing special liaisons to assist the researchers. However, these were not the norm; three-quarters of the Respondents reported, that their institutions had no support for them, or if they did, they were not made aware of its existence. The support, provided by the institutions, generally consisted of organizing Polish language courses. Other, less frequent measures, included assistance in locating an apartment, arranging residence permits, or handling tax matters. These involved mainly the Respondents' colleagues, or team leader, and were typically carried out outside of their job duties.

Language barriers also resulted in a sense of total dependency on the project manager. Although the respondents did not assert reservations as to their team leader, the situation where a team leader is the only source of support and is the only guarantor of proper conduct of the research work, is a cause for concern. The Respondents reported a lack of clear rules, as well as a lack of a clear scope of duties and requirements, which was formulated beyond the level of the research team, for example, at the level of the research institution.

This lack of adequate preparation on the part of Polish research institutions, in particular to host doctoral students, is also manifest in the shortage of teaching offered in English. At many institutions, classes are only conducted in Polish, while at others, there are relatively few classes offered in English, however, these are not necessarily well-suited to the needs of doctoral students. Another difficulty, are the exams conducted in Polish: doctoral students individually negotiate the possibility of taking exams in English, but often the material required for the examination is limited to Polish language. The offering:

of seminars, lectures and other forms of scientific discussion accessible in English, also seemed limited from the Respondents' perspective. Only 17% of the Respondents felt fully included in the scientific life of their Polish institution. A third of those surveyed (34%) agreed with the statement that they "would like to be more active, but there's not much going on at their institution in English." Finally, 42% of respondents expressed the opinion that social and networking events at their institutions were conducted exclusively in Polish.

Despite the above-mentioned problems, the study also revealed great variances between institutions. There are some, where classes, seminars and discussions are, in fact, conducted in English. This is dependent on the number of foreigners present, and the institution's experience in cooperating with them. The greater the presence of foreign persons at an institution, the friendlier and more open it seems to be.

Lack of cooperation between teams

Language is not the only barrier impeding the research work conducted by the Respondents. Another often-mentioned weakness, is the lack of cooperation and synergy between groups within the institutions. Many of the visitors were surprised to find problems in shared use of research apparatus. Additionally, they reported a lack of contact with researchers and doctoral students from other teams. They found the Polish scientific community to be excessively hierarchical and archaic—which stood in stark contrast to their own teams, which they often perceived as exceptions.

The Respondents cooperated little with other teams, and infrequently participated in joint scientific discussions. Less than half of those surveyed, said that they took part in scientific discussions with other research teams at their institution, and 40% declared no cooperation with other teams at their institutions. Contacts with scientists from other Polish institutions were even less common. The Respondents concentrated on their project, cooperating with their direct supervisor and colleagues from the team, but unfortunately integrated with the Polish scientific community only to a relatively modest degree.

Bureaucracy

Another aspect of the Polish academic community, perceived critically, was bureaucracy, which applies not only to arranging official matters, but also to conducting research work. Respondents complained of "endless red-tape in Polish", reporting long procedures for arranging seemingly trivial matters, like purchasing software, computers, or obtaining access to online resources. The lack of clear rules (also understandable in English), regarding the operation of institutions and organization of research work, reduces their efficiency. In contrast to foreign institutions, as reported by the Respondents, a lot of time is wasted in Poland. This was also indicated as one of the weaknesses of research work in our country.

Living conditions and social integration

The functioning of Respondents, involved in implementing research projects in Poland, is not limited to interactions with the research team, research institution or other scientists. The quality of life in Poland, and thus living conditions and how they fit into the society, is also relevant.

A clear majority of respondents rated the working conditions in Poland, including financial conditions, very highly. They were also satisfied with the living conditions in Poland. The salaries and scholarships offered by FNP, combined with relatively low prices, ensured a fairly high degree of living comfort. A strength of Poland is its closeness to other European countries and the general quality of life (including

urban transit, green areas, and relatively widespread knowledge of English). Almost 60% of respondents regarded living conditions in Poland as comfortable.

A weakness of the Polish experience lies not just in the difficulty in forming social relationships outside the research institution, but also within the institution. According to the study, social relationships of the Respondents were largely limited to members of their own research team, or their own ethnic group. Contacts with Poles did not strengthen as foreigners stayed longer in Poland, and many of them rate skeptically the possibility of forming friendships or collegial relationships in Poland.

In the view of some of the respondents, a problem is the unfavourable attitude of Poles toward foreigners, particularly those of a different skin colour. Some spoke outright of racism and discrimination experienced in Poland. When asked whether they felt welcome in Poland, positive responses nominally prevailed (68%), but the fact that 15% gave a negative answer is cause for concern. From the comments provided by the respondents on these and other questions, a picture emerges, in which many foreigners feel quite uncertain outside of their immediate workplace.

Adaptation of institutions to work with foreigners

Although the study focused on the perspective of foreigners coming to Poland, the responses obtained from them also allow us to imagine what kind of a challenge the presence of foreigners is for project managers, research institutions and research teams. In contrast to a situation when a Pole is recruited, the leader becomes largely responsible for organizing the foreigner's stay in Poland and suffers the consequences of problems connected with regulating the foreigner's legal status. The entire team has to change its communication habits, moving to conducting scientific discussions and everyday conversations in English. Administrative staff must also display at least basic English skills. The institution needs to implement a strategy for supporting foreigners, and an adequate offering of classes and seminars in English.

But the changes occurring in Polish research teams and institutions, under the influence of foreigners, demonstrate mutual benefits. There is no doubt that ensuring scientific discussions and instruction in English is advantageous, not only for the foreigners themselves, but also for the local scientists, better preparing them for involvement on the international science arena. The lasting change in the nature of Polish institutions, through their internationalization, should in the longer term contribute to increased attractiveness of the Polish scientific environment for foreign researchers—and consequently lead to expansion of networks of cooperation and a positive change in the image of Polish scientific community abroad.

Recommendations

- Simplification and shortening of procedures, for legalizing the status of foreign researchers, would have a fundamental impact on the quality of their life and work in Poland. The Foundation has no influence on these procedures, but it would be worthwhile to consider coming to an understanding with other institutions supporting science in Poland (particularly the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, the National Science Centre, and the National Centre for Research and Development, National Contact Point in Poland EURAXESS) and conducting joint lobbying efforts on this issue.

- Active sensitization of research institutions and teams to the needs of foreigners joining research teams, primarily with respect to open communication in English, creation of English

translations of documents and forms, but also in the offering of classes, seminars and scientific discussions.

- As far as possible, offering organized support dedicated to foreigners, which would include e.g. providing information and essential translations on fundamental issues related to legal residence status. It would also be worth considering to develop a guide, so as to facilitate foreigners' navigation of Polish research institutions and the organization of formal matters, related to their stay in Poland. Due to the great volatility of these conditions, the guides should have a flexible format and be accessible online.
- Conducting efforts toward fuller integration of foreigners into the Polish research community. These measures should primarily be initiated by research institutions. FNP also has a role to play, by offering opportunities to its laureates and stipendees to participate in meetings and networking. As the study shows, active involvement by FNP in integration measures (meetings, conferences, online platforms), would be welcome by foreigners, but should not be limited to foreigners, but rather, its focus should be to facilitate contacts with Polish researchers from outside their immediate environment. This would enable fuller participation, in the life of the Polish research community, by foreigners visiting our country, generating benefits for both foreign and Polish researchers.
- In light of the "undervaluation" of Poland on the international science arena, it would be worthwhile to build a carefully thought-out, long-term strategy for promoting Polish science abroad. The aim would be to raise the recognition of Polish research institutions around the world, to dispel negative stereotypes on research conditions in Poland, and to encourage researchers from other countries to pursue work, or studies in Poland.