

Abstract

Intake of researchers from the Fund for scientific research (FWO) to Flemish universities

On 1 October 2000, 172 permanent researchers were transferred from the FWO to Flemish universities. The Court of Audit has noticed numerous errors in this process, due in part to the fact that universities applied the “scaling” provisions from the perspective of a wider autonomy which was granted to them in 1999 with regard to the scaling of their own autonomous academic staff. Furthermore, the transfer modalities were not in line with all the considerations made about this measure during the parliamentary debate. As a result, a limited parallel staff establishment remained in existence and the positive development the FWO registered in terms of appointment of young researchers and funding of research projects is not to be ascribed to the scaling scheme. Under these circumstances the Court of Audit has insisted that a decree should be introduced to put right the numerous scaling errors.

Examination

Article 181 bis of the university decree introduced a scaling scheme under which 172 FWO permanent researchers were appointed to one of the “grades” of the Flemish university autonomous academic staff on 1 October 2000. The Court of Audit has checked whether the scaling scheme was implemented in a regular manner. It has also examined whether it adhered to the recitals underlying the parliamentary preparation of article 181bis.

Glaring violation

The examination of the scaling of the “graded” permanent researchers brought to light a number of cases of glaring violation of the scaling decree’s provisions. Universities gave their own different interpretation. In this instance, however, the legislator had not granted them the right to decide on this issue. What's more, in scaling their staff, universities sometimes awarded excessive salary scales. Each permanent FWO researcher was given the opportunity to accept or to reject the university's intake offer. Any future adjustment is therefore difficult to introduce.

Adverse effect for the FWO

The aim of the legislator was for the FWO to secure the resources needed for young researchers and for research projects. However, the amount of the salary of the intaken researchers was allocated to the universities' special research funds, thereby forfeiting the interest the FWO might get out of the existing situation. The scaling scheme even produced some side effects that put an additional strain on the FWO's financial resources. The Social Security contribution burden increased considerably and the FWO had to support the widow's/widower's pensions of its scaled staff. Admittedly, during the same period, the Flemish Community increased the amount of the FWO subsidy – leaving aside the intake – with a favourable effect on the employment of young researchers and on research financing. As a result, at the FWO the number of predoctoral researchers increased with 61 during the 1999-2002 period. Although this rise was in part attributable to shifts within the

assistant staff, by contrast, the number of university research assistants dropped during the same period with 86 units.

Remainder of the group

Twenty permanent, mostly older, researchers did not agree to the intake offer and remained with the FWO. A parallel FWO - although strongly trimmed down - researcher staff thus remained in existence. Yet, one of the considerations made during the parliamentary debate was about the disadvantage of such a parallel staff for an integrated staff policy. Besides, there are even more parallel researcher staffs over which the universities have little authority. At both predoctoral and postdoctoral levels, universities still employ staff members from other legal entities without having any power of decision over their working conditions or organisation.

Degree of satisfaction

A third consideration behind the intake was the alleged dissatisfaction among permanent FWO researchers because they some sort resented not being full academics. The Court of Audit has therefore surveyed the scaled staff satisfaction. It has found, however, no systematic - positive or negative - changes in the overall satisfaction with the statute. As a matter of fact, the situation has not changed much for researchers: they devote a little more time to teaching and administrative tasks and a little less to research as such. Admittedly, their promotional opportunities increased slightly, but their fringe benefits were somewhat reduced.

Teaching assignments

There are signs that, in some individual cases, universities have not observed the limitations imposed on the teaching assignments of the scaled staff. But a check proved impossible because there is no definition of the notion of teaching and because, on 1 October 2000, no official measurement of the scaled researchers' teaching assignments was available. To alleviate any further administrative burden, the minister did not want this verification to take place. Yet, the Court of Audit had proposed to establish a system of global reporting by means of the electronic transmission of core data.

Problems of parliamentary draft

Contrary to the decree on the universities, some scaled researchers were not given teaching assignments. Furthermore, the decree's provision for a task assignment could not be applied absolutely to research professors. Should the distinction between both staff groups remain standing, special provisions should be added to the university decree.

Ministers' response

The Flemish ministers for Education and Science replied to the Court of Audit that they intended to introduce regulatory measures to put the scaling errors right. They admitted that the new scaling did not prove of direct benefit to the FWO but they also highlighted the resulting higher number of research council tasks in the universities. For the time being,

they did not find it a good idea to dismantle all parallel researcher staff establishments because these systems were generating a good mix of inter-university and intra-university competition which proved beneficial to research in Flanders.