

PRESS RELEASE

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Report to the Flemish Parliament

Odysseus program: attracting excellent researchers from abroad

The Court of Audit audited the Odysseus program with which Flemish government wants to attract top researchers from abroad. It found concrete objectives for the program are lacking. One in three Odysseus researchers was already staying in Belgium at the time of their nomination. The program attracts significantly more postdoctoral researchers than professors and they are more often of Belgian nationality. Candidates who forgo the grant and researchers who resign during or after their mandate usually do so because of higher pay and better research infrastructure.

Audit

The Odysseus program aims to attract to Flemish universities excellent foreign researchers and Flemish researchers who work abroad. The program offers them start-up funding. Since 2006, 103 projects have been started amounting to approximately 180 million euros. The Court of Audit investigated the program, one of the audit instruments being a survey held amongst 119 (ex) Odysseus researchers and candidates.

Policy framework

The share of foreign professors at Flemish universities is still significantly smaller (11.6%) than in some other countries. Flemish government has not determined how many group I (professors) or group II (postdoctoral researchers) top researchers it wants the Odysseus program to attract, nor by which end date or whether they should be Flemish or foreign researchers.

The Fund for Scientific Research (FWO) and the universities periodically launch calls for Odysseus grant candidates. Universities nominate their candidates to the FWO, whose jury evaluates them. Until now, the FWO has divided 80% of the five-year subsidy among the universities according to a distribution key. The remaining 20% it distributed among group I candidates on the basis of a competition between universities. This method did not necessarily lead up to the best candidates being selected. Future calls are promised to be completely open to competition.

According to the regulations, Odysseus candidates can already reside in Belgium at the time of application, albeit no more than one year. This was the case for one in three Odysseus researchers, with a clear difference between group I (16.2%) and group II (43.9%). This situation is difficult to reconcile with the Odysseus objective of bringing top researchers to Belgium and does not sufficiently guarantee the added value of the program.

Results of the Odysseus program

Odysseus results show that the share of postdoctoral researchers in the program is significantly higher than the share of professors and they more often have the Belgian nationality. The share of foreign researchers in the Odysseus program remains low. In the third grant period their share only mounted to 41%. Almost all foreign researchers come from European countries. The proportion of female Odysseus researchers (21%) is significantly lower than the number of female professors at universities (39%). Universities are quite successful in recruiting enough candidates. Most Odysseus researchers (81%) believe that the program is insufficiently known to foreign researchers who do not have a network in Flanders.

The most important determining factors for applying as an Odysseus researcher are research budget size, research autonomy, contacts with host institutions and existing professional networks, academic situation with predominantly research assignments, and availability of a permanent appointment. Living conditions in Flanders and wages are less decisive.

Candidates who forgo the grant (12%) and researchers who resign during their fellowship (10.7%) or leave after their fellowship (7.2%) usually do so because of higher pay and better research infrastructure. No university has already used what is called a celebrity allowance to increase the wages of Odysseus researchers. 32% of the researchers complain about a lack of structural funding after their mandate.

Response of the minister

The Flemish Minister of Innovation agreed with most of the recommendations. However, she chooses not to set targets for the proportion of foreign researchers because of the primordial importance of the excellence criterion.

Information for the press

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The audit report on the *Odysseus program: attracting excellent researchers from abroad* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courtofaudit.be.