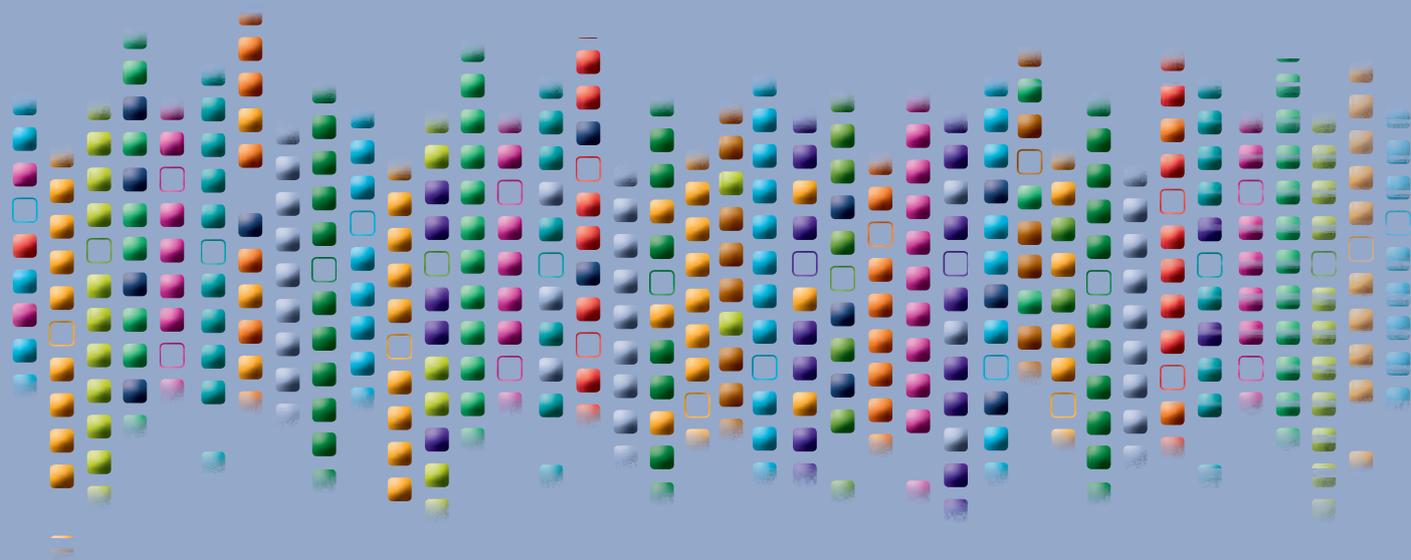




*Foundation  
for Polish Science*

# Summary from the FOCUS programme evaluation report



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**CONTENTS**

Programme description .....	3
Evaluation methods.....	4
Main conclusions from the study .....	5
Critical remarks.....	8

# SUMMARY FROM THE FOCUS PROGRAMME EVALUATION REPORT

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## PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION

The FOCUS programme was launched by the Foundation in 2006 with the objective of permitting young researchers with a notable output to their name to create their own research teams and take up new directions of research. Calls for the competition were made annually in a field of research determined by the Foundation. In 2006-2010, five rounds of the programme took place, with the following subjects:

- 2006 round – subject: mathematical modelling of biological processes
- 2007 round – subject: astrophysics and outer space research
- 2008 round – subject: molecular and biochemical cancer studies
- 2009 round – subject: global linguistic categorisation
- 2010 round – subject: nano- and microtechnologies in medicine.

A total of 130 candidates participated in these five competitions, from whom 23 beneficiaries were chosen. The three-year subsidy offered to them comprised:

- A scholarship part, designated as a personal academic stipend for the beneficiary as well as stipend for the doctoral students and young doctors working with him/her.
- A subvention part, designated for funding purchases (apparatus, materials etc.), travel expenses, and payment for auxiliary and technical work.
- Funds designated for administrative and technical costs, including acquisition of additional funding sources (grants, subventions, stipends).

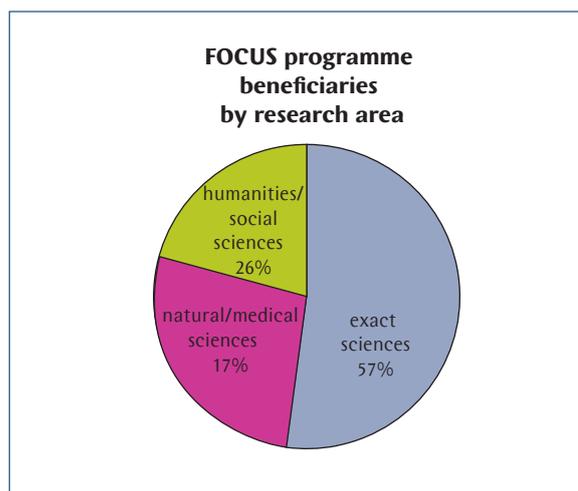
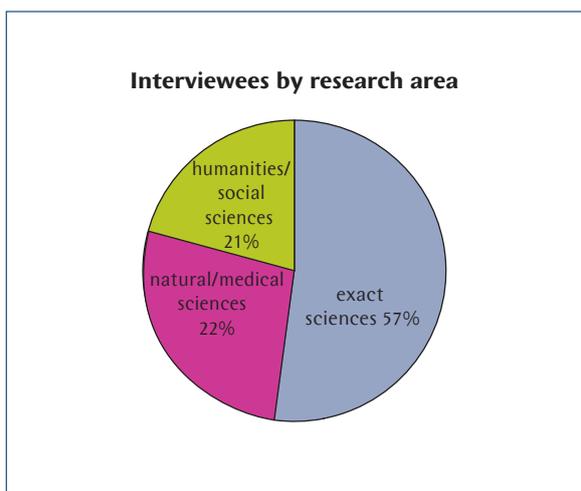
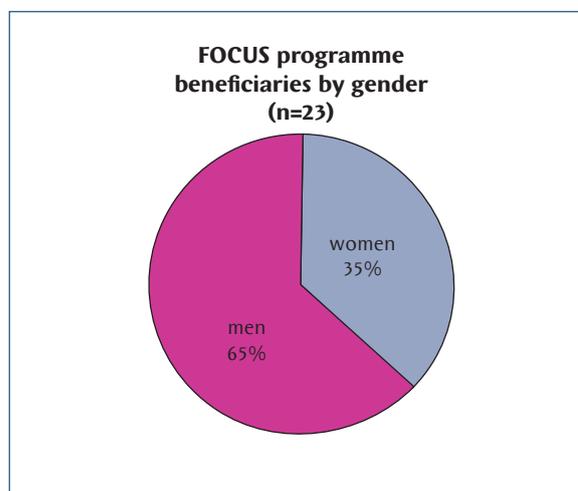
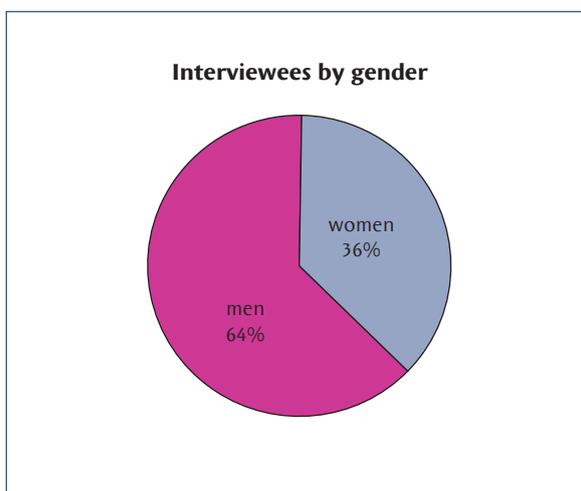
In 2006-2007 the 3-year subsidy amounted to 240,000 PLN. In the 2008-2010 rounds this figure was raised to 300,000 PLN. An additional competition was held among beneficiaries for the creation of new laboratories and improvement of research methodology. These grants were used by all programme beneficiaries in varying amounts (the average amount of grant was approx. 400,000 PLN). Apart from grants, the programme envisaged the possibility of extension of the 3-year subsidy by a further two years at the amount of the previous annual subsidy. Extensions were conditional on the beneficiaries' achievements, especially in acquisition of additional grants. The Foundation used external reviews to verify these achievements. Nine of the 13 2006-2008 beneficiaries were awarded a two-year extension of subsidies.

The last FOCUS programme competition was held in 2010. Since the programme focused on supporting researchers (rather than specific research projects), its evaluation also refers in particular to beneficiaries' career development and the influence of the programme on these careers. The objective of the research was to answer the following questions:

1. Did the programme influence the beneficiaries' scientific development, and if so, what form did this influence take and did it prove lasting?
  2. Did the programme trigger any changes for the people around the beneficiaries (since it allowed them to form research teams), and what kind?
  3. Can any factors be identified that furthered or diminished the programme's success?
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## EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation methods were to a great extent determined by the small number and diversity of the beneficiaries in terms of research disciplines. A group of 23 people of differing research disciplines, gender and place of work is unsuitable for quantitative research. However, they do provide a very interesting subject of qualitative research. This was particularly true as the evaluation questions required the perspective of the beneficiaries themselves to be taken into account. The main method employed was therefore in-depth interviews with the beneficiaries, complemented with analysis of programme documentation (the competition applications, project reports, applications for extension of subsidies and reviews). Fourteen of the 23 programme beneficiaries were interviewed, mainly from the programme's first rounds, representing very diverse research disciplines: medicine, molecular biology, astronomy, physics, chemistry, psychology and anthropology. They also represented various research institutions (universities, institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and places (Warsaw, Wrocław, Krakow, Poznań and several smaller towns). There were five women and nine men in the group. The interviewees therefore varied in terms of gender, research discipline and type, size and geographical location of research institution. At the same time, to a large degree they represented a cross-section of FOCUS programme beneficiaries.



The interviews lasted on average approx. 90 min. and focused on several main issues, such as:

- the interviewees' profile and key moments in their careers
- the importance of the awarded FOCUS subsidy
- challenges facing the researchers creating their (first) own teams
- the beneficiaries' successes and aspirations.

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS FROM THE STUDY

- The 23 beneficiaries included eight women. This is connected not only to the smaller number of women among candidates for the programme, but to a greater extent to the lower success ratio. For women this was 13.5%, and for men 20%.
- The average age at which beneficiaries received the subsidy was 35, on average five years after completion of their doctorate. This data, bearing in mind the average age of award of doctorates in Poland (34 years),<sup>1</sup> indicates that future beneficiaries achieved academic advancement considerably faster. **At the average age when doctorates are awarded in Poland, the FOCUS beneficiaries formed their own research teams.** If we combine this phase of becoming independent roughly speaking with acquisition of the habilitation degree (not all beneficiaries possessed this when the competition was adjudicated), this group was also clearly ahead of Polish academics as a whole, who on average complete their habilitation at the age of 46.
- Certain differences in academic advancement (which cannot be explained by the nature of the research disciplines) are evident between women and men. Whereas they received doctorates at a similar age (women 30, men 29), for women forming their own research team followed considerably later – 5.9 years after their doctorate (4.6 years for men). Women (on average) received the subsidy at the age of 36, and men at 34.
- All the programme beneficiaries had completed research periods abroad, although the length of time spent on these varied between less than a year and 9 years. On average it was 3.6 years.

When asked to identify turning points in their careers, the beneficiaries were almost unanimous in pointing to their research period abroad and award of a FOCUS subsidy.

- Almost all received their FOCUS subsidy upon returning from abroad or soon after their return. All were successful in forming their first research teams as a result. The beneficiaries agreed that this would not have been possible without the financial and prestigious support provided by a FOCUS subsidy (*“That laboratory simply wouldn’t exist”*).
- The majority formed these teams immediately after returning from their post-docs. Out of 23 beneficiaries, five had begun work and formed their teams in a different institution from the one in which they gained their doctorate. Their readiness to work in a new research institution was generally connected to the length of the period abroad. The great majority did not want to risk losing employment in their home institution when they left for their post-doc, which could thus not last too long (around 2 years). People who spent more time abroad (e.g. 9 years) had to look for work “from scratch”, which proved difficult.

### The most frequently and emphatically stressed effects of the programme are:

#### Gaining independence/change in role

Particularly for people who remained at their alma mater, FOCUS made it possible to be truly independent and become a researcher who not only does not require supervision but can conduct his/her own research, obtain grants and manage the work of a team.

*“FOCUS allowed me to change my role. Meaning that thanks to FOCUS it was me that started looking for people to work with”.*

<sup>1</sup> Batorski Dominik, Bojanowski Michał, Czerniawska Dominika: *Diagnoza mobilności instytucjonalnej i geograficznej osób ze stopniem doktora w Polsce*. 2007.  
[http://www.nauka.gov.pl/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Nauka/Polityka\\_naukowa\\_panstwa/Analizy\\_raporty\\_statystyki/20100510\\_Diagnoza\\_mom/HS/32nosci.pdf](http://www.nauka.gov.pl/fileadmin/user_upload/Nauka/Polityka_naukowa_panstwa/Analizy_raporty_statystyki/20100510_Diagnoza_mom/HS/32nosci.pdf)

## Better position at university, better working conditions

Both when continuing employment at the “old” place and starting at a “new” one, according to beneficiaries’ accounts FOCUS was a factor in assuring them considerably better conditions for their research work, e.g. working space.

### Leverage effect

Beneficiaries, especially in experimental sciences, assessed the subsidies offered by the FOCUS programme as relatively low in comparison with other grants received later. However, they were aware that it was FOCUS that had enabled them to acquire these further grants. As the Foundation anticipated, a leverage effect took effect. The prestige and research opportunities attached to this programme determined later successes.

*“These funds are indeed on the small side, but they give a great deal. Firstly... they are low in comparison to TEAM, but these are not small amounts, because if you get a sum of 500,000 zł for equipment, you can see an awful lot, and if you see it, then others are happy to chip in too. (...) The Foundation said that it would give an additional 150,000 if the university gave 150,000 too. (...) I went to the dean and said, “I can get more money if you find the money for it. And of course he did. And instead of 500,000 there was now 650,000 zł. But more important was the fact that the existence of FOCUS allowed us to get more funds – we gained four grants in the meantime. And that was the way it worked. (...) And suddenly there was a snowball. (...) But it’s obvious that the first grant is the hardest one to get. And FOCUS was the crucial first grant”.*

Many beneficiaries described how, following FOCUS, other funds, infrastructure and people came – foreign partners as well as students. They also stressed that their subsequent grants – including an ERC grant for one female beneficiary – were the continuation of the FOCUS project. It was FOCUS that enabled many of the beneficiaries to develop their own research. One person put it in this way: *I started doing what I’d always wanted to do [m/PM/39].*

### Motivation

The leverage effect was not only about real opportunities, but also reaffirming beneficiaries’ motivation and faith in their chances for success in science.

*When I received FOCUS, then... it was as if it turned out that ...I mean... I had so much energy, such a surge of energy, and I felt that these were chances to achieve what I’d been thinking about for a long time but there’d never been a way to achieve.*

This effect is extremely significant if we take into account the huge amount of work facing beneficiaries and their new role as managers motivating their teams.

### Good new team/laboratory

Beneficiaries speak with pride of the teams and laboratories they formed.

*I must say, the final result is incredible – we have a newly built, extremely well-equipped lab where 12 people are currently working, and that all came about thanks to FOCUS.*

These teams sometimes go beyond Poland, as with one beneficiary, whose ambition is to build a group that is unique in Europe:

*At the moment I have an international team, a group that works together, people from Latin America, the USA and Europe who are fascinated in this problem. Of course, I'm the one who shoulders the burden of finding funds for, for this growing team, but this is an absolute novelty for them, because, because there is no such tradition in humanities for team-based work.*

### Improvement in beneficiaries' financial situation

Some of the interviewees mentioned that the subsidy had allowed them to stop “earning on the side”, previously an essential addition to their pay for their research work.

*Since getting the subsidy I haven't been doing anything else. I'm employed here, and that's all, whereas previously I never held a full-time post, but simply earned extra by teaching. And all my colleagues do that, and I think that holds us back an awful lot.*

### Continuing/beginning research work in Poland

Some of the beneficiaries said that without the FOCUS subsidy and the opportunity to lead their own team they would not be working in Poland, where an excessively hierarchical academic system restricts the development of young researchers.

*If I hadn't got FOCUS, I wouldn't be in Poland, right? I wouldn't have come back. I wouldn't be here, or my team, or my lab, nothing (...) I certainly wouldn't have returned. Because I'm a doctor too and operate within a medical university, where a feudal, structured system is in place. So you're... you can't do much even if you have a good idea.*

### Recipients of programme scholarships

As with the beneficiaries themselves, thanks to FOCUS the recipients of their scholarships also get a chance for a “good start”. Specific examples came up in the interviews of the scholarship-recipients' achievements: Diamond Grant, Fulbright scholarship, Mazowsze Region scholarship, National Science Centre grant, placement in Spain, Germany, the USA. The programme allowed beneficiaries to “give a scholarship to people and really take the best ones”. They imagine that without this some able students would have gone into business or the USA or been forced to earn extra on the side and look for other positions, which sooner or later would have made it impossible for them to conduct their own serious research. It is too early to trace the fortunes of recipients of scholarships after they have left the teams formed within FOCUS, as most of these teams were launched relatively recently and their members are still reaching the doctorate stage (one 2008 beneficiary spoke of the emotions that came when his first doctoral student submitted his thesis). The accounts of people who have completed FOCUS projects show that the members of their teams remained in research, and often still work with the beneficiary within further grants, e.g. TEAM. Others have left for research stays.

## CRITICAL REMARKS

Though predominantly enthusiastic about the programme, the interviewees were not uncritical of certain aspects. The main ones they identified were:

### **The requirement of a promise of employment from candidates.**

There were complaints in the interviews that the Foundation does not appreciate the difficulty in finding employment for a scientist who has for example returned to Poland from a lengthy stay abroad. It was claimed that one can return to one's alma mater (if the stay was not too long), but such people are not particularly desired in other institutions and are not offered permanent posts. However, receipt of a subsidy radically changed the employment prospects. If they were able to choose their place of work only at this point, the beneficiaries would have the chance to work at better institutions.

### **Unrealistic expectations from beneficiaries**

The premises of the programme anticipated that among those helped in building their first research teams would be those yet to complete their habilitation. However, it often proved impossible – despite funds for scholarships – for a person without a habilitation to acquire doctoral students. According to several interviewees, it was also unrealistic to expect young researchers to create teams and laboratories “from scratch” in an environment new to them and manage to recruit people to these teams and generate results. Even attracting students at the new place proved very difficult for young, unrecognised researchers. From this point of view, beneficiaries creating teams at their previous work place had a much easier task. Beneficiaries whose projects were dependent on long-term activities started from scratch, such as collection of data, also had problems meeting the Foundation's expectations.

The main factor helping to optimise the programme operation was identified in the interviews as the support of the employer institution. From the Foundation's point of view, the commitment of the institution employing the researcher was a key condition of the programme's success. However, this commitment sometimes proved insufficient, putting the beneficiary in a very difficult situation. For example, the research institution was unable to cover its own contribution, or its administration did not manage to utilise the funds for equipping the laboratory.



