

Evaluation of the *Homing* Programme of the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP)

Expert Panel Report

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Preface and acknowledgement

In September 2008, the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP) convened an expert group (hereafter “the Panel”) to conduct an assessment of *Homing*, a funding scheme which aims to encourage and facilitate the reintegration of Polish scientists returning from abroad.

This assessment took place during a time of significant change in the Polish education and research system. Between 2007 and 2013, about €4 billion of EU structural funds are expected to be injected into the research system. Two new funding bodies are due to be established in the near future: the National Centre for Research and Development, which will fund R&D projects and programmes, and the National Research Centre, which will fund “bottom-up” basic research projects. The R&D Budget is expected to grow by about 28% in 2009.

The FNP plays an important role in these dynamics. It provides innovative ideas and serves as a counselling unit for Polish science policy. Because of its independence and flexibility, FNP can quickly develop new research funding schemes which are seen to exemplify “best practice” throughout Poland. The Panel is honoured to contribute to the work of FNP through the assessment of the *Homing* scheme.

The scope of the Panel’s assessment and recommendations was confined to the objectives, the design and the management of the funding scheme – areas in which panel members, mostly with a science management background, felt competent to provide advice. The fact that four of five members of the Panel came from a foreign research culture sharpened its collective eye for the specificities of the Polish research system and the research systems of Central and Eastern European countries in general. The Panel is mindful of the fact that approaches which have proved to work in one research system may not be easily transposed to a different environment. It believes, however, that the recommendations in this report – if carefully implemented – can be effective in the context in which FNP and *Homing* operate and that they will help improve the programme.

The Panel wishes to thank Ms. Marta Łazarowicz-Kowalik who oversaw the evaluation exercise at FNP and provided continued support to this initiative. The Panel is also most grateful to the senior officials and staff members of FNP who were so helpful in presenting the rationale and context of the programme and in answering questions.

We hope that this report will be valuable to FNP in its efforts to improve the performance of the *Homing* scheme.

1. Introduction

Established in 1991, the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP) is an independent organisation which provides assistance and support to the scientific community in Poland. It operates a range of grant schemes, scientific prizes and programmes to support individual scientists and research groups across all research fields, to facilitate technology transfer and to support the development of research facilities in Poland.

The *Homing* programme which is the subject of this evaluation report was established in 2006 to encourage the return of Polish scientists from abroad and to facilitate their reintegration. Since 2007 *Homing* has been partly financed through the European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanism. The scheme targets early-stage researchers who are citizens or permanent residents of Poland, returning to Poland to pursue a research career. Laureates are expected to sign an employment contract with a Polish institution with an R&D mission.

Laureates are selected through a two-stage peer review process. After a check of eligibility and other formal criteria by the programme director at FNP, the applications are reviewed by (at least three) external referees who assign them a score (on scale of 1 to 3) and provide general funding recommendations. The second stage consists of an interview of the most highly ranked candidates by a review panel made up of external experts in specific fields as well as members of the FNP board and programme directors at FNP.

In 2006 and 2007 the Foundation received 46 and 44 applications respectively. The number of applications rose to 59 in 2008. In each of its first two years, 16 grants were awarded (15 in 2008), representing the maximum available number of grants. Over the three year period, women accounted for 40% of applicants and 36% of laureates.

The grant is awarded for a period of two years (which can be extended for a further year under certain conditions). It covers a tax-free individual stipend for the laureate and a subsidy to carry out the research project. In 2008, the individual stipend was 32,000 PLN (about 7,300 EUR) and the subsidy 40,000 PLN (about 9,200 EUR) per year.

The results of the survey of laureates conducted by the FNP office shows that the individual stipend is a non-negligible income supplement. Of 26 who answered the question, 15 indicated that it makes up between 25% and 50% of their regular salary. For seven grantees it makes up an even higher portion of the regular salary. According to data from financial reports submitted by laureates, on average, about half of the subsidies are used to purchase

research equipment and over a third to participate in international conferences and research cooperation exchanges.

The Panel was convened in late 2008 to evaluate the *Homing* programme and to provide recommendations on which features could be improved. For this evaluation, it reviewed the following set of documents provided by the FNP office.

- Regulations of *Homing* programme
- Summary report on the performance of the *Homing* programme in 2006-2008
- Results of a survey of laureates of the *Homing* programme
- Report on a study of the mobility of young Polish scientists commissioned by FNP

In addition, the Panel held a meeting with high-ranking officials and senior staff members of FNP in which key aspects of the scheme and changes in the Polish research landscape were discussed and questions answered (Warsaw, 4 December 2008).

This evaluation report is the result of the discussions of the Panel which started during its meeting in Warsaw on 4 December 2008 and continued through email interaction. The report is divided in two parts. It starts with short general observations and an assessment of the programme. Its second part lists in more detail the recommendations of the panel on four issues: general management of the scheme, selection procedures, administration of funds and working conditions of the *Homing* laureates.

In addition to the list of documents the panel used for the assessment, the appendix contains short biographical information on the Panel members.

2. General assessment

The *Homing* programme has been in existence for three years. During this time a total of 149 applications have been received by FNP and evaluated through an extensive peer review process, and 47 laureates have been given financial support to pursue their research activities at Polish research institutions.

A three-year time span is a short period for a funding scheme to be evaluated in any great depth or breadth. In particular, the extent to which it is achieving its overall and specific goals cannot be meaningfully assessed after so short a time.

In its assessment, the Panel put a stronger emphasis on the general design of the programme, its management and its potential to achieve its specific goals. The Panel identified several achievements of the programme which are to the credit of FNP.

The Panel believes that the programme addresses a serious problem for the Polish research system. While the mobility of researchers is per se a positive feature of the dynamics of a research system, there are legitimate concerns that this could turn into a one-sided migration pattern and thus seriously harm research systems which are “net senders”. Evidently, no single funding scheme can be expected to solve a “brain-drain” problem which is a complex phenomenon depending on many factors (structural, financial and personal). In the opinion of the Panel, however, the *Homing* programme, in its current design, structure and management, doubtlessly contributes to redressing at least parts of the underlying problems.

Both the survey of laureates and the analysis of grant data show clearly that the programme makes it easier for outstanding Polish post-doctoral researchers to return to pursue a research career in Poland. It may be debated whether the programme has really encouraged researchers to return to Poland or has merely facilitated those who had already decided to return, but there is no doubt that the programme helps its laureates to re-establish themselves in the Polish research system, initiate small scale projects, maintain their valuable international networks and – not unimportantly – to prevent them from suffering excessively from a decrease in income.

The programme management has succeeded in initiating and establishing agreements with prestigious foreign research institutions and funding bodies, which the Panel believes will lead – in the mid- and long term – to attracting the best candidates.

The Panel was pleased with the overall setting and achievements of the *Homing* programme and recommends its continuation without any substantial modifications. The division of the

available funds into a portion for topping up personal income and a grant portion seems appropriate to the situation of scientists returning to Poland.

While the review of the funding landscape lay outside the scope of the assessment, the Panel was pleased to learn that FNP was preparing a review of its portfolio of funding schemes. The Panel welcomes and supports such a review because it is concerned by the large number of (relatively small-scale) funding schemes the Foundation operates. In this portfolio review, the Foundation should also reflect on how overlaps in funding schemes can be avoided. While in some cases overlaps in the programme portfolio can be justified, unnecessary overlaps frustrate an efficient use of resources.

The following section presents some recommendations which the Panel believes can significantly improve the programme.

3. Recommendations

3.1 General management

In order to facilitate future evaluations, the panel suggests formulating a **visionary mission statement** for the *Homing* programme. This task is, of course, entirely at the discretion of FNP. However, the Panel wishes to provide some examples of plausible visionary mission statements:

- *Homing* is seen as a best practice funding scheme
- *Homing* laureates successfully obtain funding and/or awards in international competitions
- *Homing* laureates have a high scientific impact
- *Homing* laureates are expected to significantly advance in their careers

The **overall aim** of the programme is clearly stated but the objectives of the programme stating how this aim is to be achieved could be better formulated.

The Panel suggests the following objectives for the *Homing* programme:

- It encourages young researchers returning to Poland to continue their research career by providing a non-taxable income complement.
- It enables researchers to maintain contact with their former research institution (abroad).
- It provides some flexible funding for a small-scale project.

The 2+1 year **funding period** of the *Homing* programme should not be altered.

3.2 Selection procedures

The Panel unanimously recommends eliminating the **eligibility restriction** for applicants which currently allows applications only within four years after completion of their PhD. Most international outgoing funding schemes address the very same target group. By consequence, only very young (and thus inexperienced) scientists can be funded in the *Homing* programme. However, many scientists abroad prefer to undertake a second postdoc project before making a decision to return to their home countries. By dropping this eligibility restriction, the FNP will be able to attract the best scientists at various career stages. It has been argued that the selection of *Homing* programme candidates at different career stages would be more difficult, because a common basis for comparison would be lacking. However, based on experience in their various organisations, Panel members are convinced that the experts in the selection committees are cognisant of which level of scientific achievement can be expected at different career levels in the respective fields of research.

The **selection process** in the *Homing* programme is working very well and should not be altered. In particular, the two-stage selection process including an independent review and an applicant interview is welcomed. However, the Panel suggests restructuring the existing assessment criteria in such a way that the person and his/her achievements be given the greatest weight in the funding decision. In addition, the project plan as well as the research environment should also be included in the assessment.

[N.B: the Panel did not agree on how to weight the candidates' previous and institutional affiliation (foreign and national) or whether to take them into consideration in the assessment at all. Part of the Panel stressed that it believes in people and not in places and that the quality of research institutions would be difficult to objectively assess. Other Panel members, on the other hand, argued that the research environment is an important factor in the development of a research career].

The Panel is concerned about the high number of laureates returning to their **PhD institutions**. However, no formal obstacle hinders the laureates from doing so. For the purpose of selection procedures in the case of applicants of equal quality, preference is currently given to candidates who choose to work at an institution other than their PhD institutions. This procedure should remain unaltered.

The Panel strongly suggests granting a **flexible number** of *Homing* awards. The sole criterion should be excellence of the respective candidate. In the case that there are more funds

available than excellent candidates in one specific call, the remaining funds should be spared for the next call with more excellent applications.

3.3 Administration of funds

The **grant portion** of the funding amount should suffice to run a small-scale project. However, this should not be the exclusive intended purpose of these funds. The grant portion should be as flexible as Polish regulations allow. It should especially be demand-oriented, that is, the funds should be available when needed: more funds will probably be required at the beginning of a project to get it started. It should be possible to use the grant portion of the funds to cover staffing costs, scientific instrumentation, consumables, outsourced services, and publication costs. All these options should be stated in the programme calls to show the flexibility of the grant portion.

The **administrative load** for laureates appears to be too high; the Panel unanimously recognised that reporting cycles are too short. An interim or final report should be requested after two years, (if applicable, the final report after the third year). If consistent with Polish administrative rules, it should be attempted to restrict the interim report to deviations from the original research and financing plan. The Panel wishes to emphasize that the best service for scientists is a low administrative and reporting load.

The Panel noted that Polish institutions have an indirect benefit from *Homing* laureates' presence, because block funding is linked to the research institute's performance. This performance is expected to rise with the affiliation of a *Homing* laureate. While this can be seen as reason not to pay overheads to research institutions hosting the laureates, the Panel believes that the issue of **overheads** should nevertheless be sorted out in dialog with the research institutions.

[N.B: The Panel leaves open the question of whether overheads should be paid to the institution to spend at its discretion or should be related to the programme for which they are paid.]

3.4 Working conditions and future of *Homing* laureates

The Panel recommends ensuring **good working conditions** for the laureate through a contract with the host institution. A (symbolic) overhead is thought to help enforce the implementation of this contract.

The Panel is concerned about the **future of *Homing* laureates** after the funding period has ended. Obviously, FNP cannot improve the Polish research landscape and thus the career perspectives and working conditions of young Polish scientists returning after a research stay abroad. That should be a long-term objective for the political powers. The Panel welcomes the eligibility of *Homing* laureates for other FNP funding schemes on a competitive basis. However, it cannot be an aim of FNP to repeatedly and successively sponsor the same scientists in a variety of FNP programmes. *Homing* laureates should be pointed to other funding sources to ensure their independence and to offer a perspective for a continuous career in science. To achieve this aim, the Polish and European funding systems should be reviewed and structured to provide an information service on the various national and international funding opportunities. The Polish Mobility Centre within the EURAXESS network could be a good partner for this task.

4. APPENDIX

4.1 List of documents used by the Panel in its assessment

1. Regulations of the *Homing* programme by FNP
2. Internal summary report on the performance of the *Homing* programme in 2006-2008
3. A survey of laureates of the *Homing* programme conducted by the FNP office (09/2008)
4. Report of a study of the mobility of young Polish scientists commissioned by FNP and conducted by the Centre for Social and Economic Research (CASE) (December 2007)

4.2 Short biographical information of the Panel members

Sven Baszio

Dr. Baszio is Head of Division Europe at the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In this capacity, he is responsible for sponsoring and creating a network of excellent scientists in Europe through various schemes. Before he joined the Humboldt Foundation he was a scientist at the *Senckenberg Centre for Biodiversity Research* in Frankfurt. He studied computer sciences, biology and geology in Frankfurt. He grew up in France and Italy and has carried out research in the USA and Canada.

Pawel Kaczmarczyk

Dr. Kaczmarczyk is Vice-Director of the Centre of Migration Research at the University of Warsaw and assistant professor at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw. He is also a member of the Board of Strategic Advisers to the

Prime Minister of Poland. His main research areas, on which he has authored many publications, include causes and consequences of labour migration (with special attention paid to analysis of migration processes in CEE countries), labour economics, international economics and migration policy.

Kari Kveseth

Dr. Kveseth is the International Director at the Research Council of Norway. She has a PhD in chemistry from the University of Oslo. She has had different positions as director within the Research Council since 1986. She has broad experience in research and science policy organisations both as a member of boards and member of expert committees for targeted studies, assessments and evaluations. Her research and scientific publications are in the areas of experimental gas electron diffraction and environmental impact.

Alexis-Michel Mugabushaka

Dr. Mugabushaka works as Science Officer for corporate science policy in the office of the Chief Executive of the European Science Foundation (ESF) in Strasbourg. In this capacity he oversees science policy initiatives of the organisation and is in charge of developing a framework to evaluate various ESF activities. He also coordinates a Forum to exchange information and experiences in evaluation in research organisations across Europe. He previously held the positions of Officer for Statistics and Evaluation at the German Research Council (DFG) and Research Associate at the University of Kassel, Germany. He holds a doctorate in applied social sciences in the area of higher education and science policy studies.

Gerlind Wallon

Dr. Wallon is Deputy Director of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO). Her responsibilities include the preparation and implementation of internal and external EMBO policies. She has developed the organisation's Young Investigator Programme, Installation Grants and Women in Science activities. Dr. Wallon holds a PhD in biochemistry from Brandeis University, Waltham, USA.