

Implementation of the Principles of the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers by the Foundation for Polish Science

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The European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers is a set of recommendations published in 2005 by the European Commission (EC) to increase the attractiveness of the European labor market for researchers. The recommendations include principles that researchers, research units, and grant-making institutions should follow.

Institutions that adjust their mode of operation to the recommendations of the Charter and the Code receive the logo “HR Excellence in Research” from the EC. The Foundation for Polish Science (FNP), as the first institutions in Poland received the logo in 2012. However, the implementation of the Charter and the Code is a continuous process that consists in cyclical analysis. The FNP has conducted internal evaluations of our activities in this regard twice already, in 2014 and 2017. In 2018, EC experts positively assessed the compliance of the Foundation’s activities with the principles of the Charter and the Code, which allowed us to maintain the distinction “HR Excellence in Research.”

In 2020, it was time for another review. In the years since we began implementing the Charter and the Code, we significantly changed the Foundation’s offer, the way and conditions of its operations, and the legal environment. Many of the challenges identified earlier were successfully tackled, while new ones have emerged.

The ideas behind the Charter and the Code are consistent with the goals of the Foundation, which is committed to raising the standards of research work, enhancing the attractiveness of the research profession and research work conditions, but also supporting mobility and sectoral cooperation. The patterns and standards contained in the two documents – along with good practices applied by other institutions that implement the Charter and the Code – became an important element of the FNP’s strategy and rules of operation.

As a grant-making institution, the FNP implements the recommendations of the Charter and the Code in two main areas: (1) the conduct of its own competitions, and (2) its expectations of its grantees. The former encompasses how the FNP treats scientists, assesses their competence, selects applications for funding, and sets rules of cooperation with them. The latter focuses on ensuring open recruitment rules and appropriate working conditions in funded projects. In recent years, the latter aspect has played an increasingly important role as the Foundation’s programs have increasingly shifted toward financing teams, consortia, and even research units. Below, we present a summary of FNP activities in this area.

Applications Evaluation and Selection

The application evaluation process at the Foundation is strictly based on qualitative criteria. Bibliometric indicators are never a determinant of the evaluation. The Foundation is a signatory of the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). This stipulates that the quality of scientific achievements and their impact on the development of a scientific discipline should be the basis for researcher evaluation rather than bibliometric parameters like the Impact Factor.

The most important criterion for the FNP is the originality of research achievements. At the same time, depending on the purpose of the program, other criteria are applied and achievements in other areas, such as commercialization, are evaluated.

The Foundation supports researchers at different stages of their careers by assessing their achievements according to the path and phase of their professional development. In the assessment as well as eligibility criteria, FNP takes into account career breaks, such as those associated with parenthood.

The Foundation does not apply the criterion of biological age in any of its programs, except for the START program, which aims to recognize the most talented young scientists and encourage them to further scientific development.

When evaluating achievements, instead of the best research publications from the last three to five years, applicants are asked to submit their best publications regardless of when they were published.

To ensure that these rules are followed, the Foundation introduced detailed instructions for the experts who evaluate proposals. The process of proposal evaluation and selection undergoes internal scrutiny. Moreover, the Foundation conducts surveys among the experts who evaluate the proposals to see how the process looks from their perspective. A key element of the evaluation are the surveys of competition participants' experiences.

The guarantee of a reliable and competent assessment of applications primarily results from a careful expert selection (reviewers and panelists). During competition periods, the Foundation engages even more than 1200 experts per year, searching the world for the best specialists in the relevant area. Foreign researchers make 80% of this group.

One of the basic challenges faced by the FNP as a grant-making organization is to avoid conflicts of interest. Among other things, this is done through a careful selection process of experts who evaluate the proposals. Moreover, the Foundation developed a definition of conflict of interest, so that before being involved in the evaluation, each person signs an appropriate declaration of absence of conflict of interest; this regards both external experts and FNP employees. We also introduced a procedure for dealing with potential conflicts of interest.

The evaluation process quality further gained from providing the candidates with the content of their reviews and expert opinions. We are committed to providing candidates with the opportunity to respond to criticism and discuss them with experts at the committee review stage. Reliable and insightful reviews should also be a valuable aid for improving grant projects. However, preparing such feedback is challenging. Given that, on average, only about 15% of applications receive funding, the failure of many others is often determined not by specific weaknesses but, instead, by comparison with other applications.

For many years, the Foundation has allowed applicants to appeal the results of the evaluation. Although we consider the possibility of experts' errors, time and cost limitations of running competitions practically exclude substantive polemics with reviews, so appeals typically concern formal faults. To reduce the likelihood of unfair assessment, each application is evaluated by multiple experts.

Recruitment in Programs

The primary objective of FNP programs is to enable early-career scientists to acquire knowledge and experience in teams led by outstanding researchers from around the world. To this end, the Foundation funds research teams. When selecting competition winners with significant international

research achievements, the FNP entrusts them with the task of recruiting students, doctoral candidates, or postdoctoral researchers. The key to this activity is ensuring open international competitions and fair, transparent recruitment rules. The Foundation grantees receive detailed recommendations in this regard, including templates for recruitment announcements and information on where they should be posted. Representatives of the FNP participate in recruitment processes as observers, and the protocols of these processes are the basis for the payment of salaries. Recruitment processes in the projects financed by the Foundation are subject to systematic evaluation.

Some FNP programs entrust the recruitment of postdoctoral researchers and group leaders to special committees that monitor project development (an international scientific committee in the MAB programme and a management team in the TEAM-NET program). Moreover, programme conditions sometimes exclude the participation of former staff members of the same institution (TEAM-NET).

Working Conditions in Projects

The Foundation employs no researchers directly but seeks to ensure that its programs provide them with the most attractive working conditions possible. Grant agreements oblige the institutions that implement grants to provide safe, adequate, and if possible, stable working conditions. In most programs, researchers (including postdoctoral researchers) must be employed under an employment contract. Attractive salaries are also essential from our viewpoint. We ensure that the level of salaries and stipends in our programs is comparable to the amounts foreseen in the programs of the European Commission (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions). The Foundation allocates adequate amounts for salaries and fellowships in programme budgets and suggests their level in programme documentation.

FNP programmes allow for flexible and part-time working hours in funded projects. In order to enable scientists to concentrate on research work, the Foundation recommends to grantees that researchers' teaching duties should not exceed 60 hours per year (in the case of doctoral candidates this limit is 45 hours).

Moreover, the Foundation takes into account the specific situation of female researchers by offering project managers the possibility to increase the project implementation time, especially in the case of childbirth or adoption.

International Research Environment

One of the Foundation's goals is to increase Poland's participation in world science. We strive to achieve this by supporting high-quality research and introducing the best global practices in identifying research topics, personnel policy, and R&D results commercialization. We are committed to attracting scientists from around the world to Poland, both Poles returning from abroad and foreigners. We are pleased to note the growing share of foreigners in the teams recruited under the Foundation's programmes. Among all team members in FNP programmes, foreigners account for 14.7%, i.e. 149 out of 1012 people employed in all projects under Measure 4.4 of POIR, and 33.2%, i.e. 66 out of 199 people employed in grants under Measure 4.3 of POIR. At the same time, we are increasingly aware of the difficulties foreigners face after arriving in Poland. As shown by our survey on experiences of foreigners participating in projects co-financed by the FNP, the attractiveness of research work in our country is strongly limited by problems related to their formal status (the so-called residence card), communication barriers, and often the lack of preparation of Polish institutions to welcome foreigners. In many places, foreigners are very scarce, and their Polish colleagues are not accustomed to holding conversations in English. As a result, only about a third of our quantitative survey respondents feel fully included in group communication. Only 17% of respondents feel fully included in the academic life of their Polish institution. One-third of respondents (34%) subscribe to

the statement that “they would like to be more active, but not much happens in English at their institution.” Finally, 42% of respondents express the opinion that social and networking events at their institution are only announced in Polish.

We want to take measures to facilitate the integration of foreigners into the Polish environment and support our research institutions in this task.

Gender Balance

For many years, the Foundation has been monitoring the share of women among applicants and winners of its competitions. Competition statistics reveal an underrepresentation of women, especially at more advanced career stages and in certain fields of science. This applies to both applicants and grantees, with the success rate for both genders not significantly differentiated. For many years, the Foundation has believed that the correct approach to addressing the gender imbalance is to consistently apply the principle of non-discrimination. However, we gradually introduced more and more measures to increase the participation of women in science. First, eligibility criteria in competitions for early-career researchers (START, FIRST TEAM) were extended to take motherhood into consideration. Second, we introduced programmes that enable returning to research work after a break linked with parenthood (POMOST, later also POWROTY).

In 2021, FNP adopted the policy “Promoting Equality and Diversity,” in which it formulates its objectives, principles of action, and mechanisms for intervention and monitoring in this regard.

The Foundation’s goal is to enable researchers to grow and to make full use of their research skills and passions. Therefore, activities for the benefit of a diverse scientific community work also toward improving the quality of the science. We know that ensuring true equality of opportunities for groups at risk of discrimination is difficult due to structural and historically established barriers. However, this does not relieve us of our responsibility to co-create academic culture and support the best scientists.

Moreover, the Foundation aims to increase the share of women among reviewers, panelists, and the scientists who nominate candidates for the FNP Prize. In 2020–21, the share of women among reviewers increases to 24% (from 19% in 2012–2016). A challenge in equalizing the share of women among experts is the lower representation of women among scientists at advanced career stages, especially in certain scientific fields. The key criterion in expert selection is their substantive competence in the proposed research area. Given the time pressure and overload of reviewing tasks on scientists, we cannot always achieve the desired gender proportions. However, the Foundation strives and will continue to strive for this goal.

We are committed to increasing the promotion of women and their achievements in science. The FNP is the first Polish partner of the AcademiaNet project, which is an initiative of the Bosch Foundation to create an international database of women experts to promote women’s scientific successes, but also to increase their involvement in decision-making bodies. The role of the Foundation in the project is to nominate Polish women scientists to participate in this project.

Training

The high quality of early-career researchers’ education is one of the fundamental elements of the Foundation’s mission. Applications in our competitions are mostly evaluated in this regard. The quality of the proposed research is analyzed not only in terms of its contribution to the development of science but also of its significance for the career development of the project participants. In this context, our experts consider project indicators in the form of publications by team members and their scientific degrees, among other things. Opportunities to train researchers are also considered when evaluating partnership in grants: partners from other research centers – especially foreign or

commercial – are expected to actively participate in developing project participants' competencies. The Foundation's programs are designed to support teams of adequate scale and structure to provide high-quality scientific care to early career researchers. The principles of this care are regulated by the "Code of Ethics for Beneficiaries and Candidates in Programmes of the Foundation for Polish Science." Finally, we carefully evaluate the quality of doctoral candidates' training in funded projects.

To the extent possible, the FNP also offered training support to researchers. The SKILLS project in 2007–2015 aimed to improve skills in project and research team management, develop scientific communication skills, and shape pro-innovation attitudes. As part of the project, the Foundation offered training, mentoring, coaching, and an internship program. Moreover, the FNP ran competitions for ideas in science popularization, both by interdisciplinary activities and commercialization. The idea of such support remains very close to us. Although it is currently beyond our financial and staffing capacity, our grants include the possibility of funding the necessary training: up to 30% of the project budget can be allocated for this purpose.

Scientific Freedom and Ethical Codes

The Foundation adheres to the principle of the freedom of scientific research. Researchers are free to identify problems, formulate hypotheses, and choose research methods. Moreover, their scientific autonomy is guaranteed by grant agreements signed with the institutions where the grants are implemented. The only limits are ethical and professional standards, along with legal and financial constraints.

Maintaining ethical standards and promoting best practices in this respect is one of the priorities of the FNP. Already many years ago, the Foundation introduced codes of ethics that define the principles and values binding not only its employees but also beneficiaries, candidates, and reviewers. Among other things, these codes concern matters of scientific integrity, support for early-career researchers, respect for the law – including intellectual property rights – observance of the principle of authorship, and respect for other scientists' achievements and independence regardless of their position in the academic hierarchy. The "Code of Ethics for Beneficiaries and Candidates in Programmes of the Foundation for Polish Science" condemns plagiarism, falsification of results, and discrimination. The Foundation's employees are obliged by the "Code of Ethics of the Foundation for Polish Science" to treat scientists with objectivity, confidentiality, transparency, equality, kindness, professionalism, and responsibility. Both codes have a dynamic character and are supplemented to address new challenges as they emerge.

In order to enable the assessment of the codes' application, the Foundation introduced the "Rules of Procedure at the Foundation for Polish Science in the Event of a Possible Violation of Ethical Rules or Failure to Apply Good Practice in Science" and established the Ethics and Good Practices Commission.

Any person with such information may inform the Foundation about a possible violation of ethical principles; the FNP employees and experts are obliged to do so. Details on how this action should proceed are provided on the FNP website: there is a possibility to inform the FNP at the e-mail address: etyka@fnp.org.pl.

Professional Responsibility

The Foundation funds both basic research and the transfer of research results to business practice. Depending on the type of research – and the type and scale of the project – the FNP holds different expectations regarding the results. However, the research financed by us should always serve the social good, aim to expand the frontiers of scientific knowledge, and contribute to Poland's civilizational development. Applicants and beneficiaries must comply with the rules that govern their

research conditions and the spending of awarded funds in accordance with Polish law. Moreover, they must observe principles of careful, transparent, and effective financial management.

The FNP provides a mechanism that allows potential irregularities, fraud, or suspected fraud to be signaled via email at the following email address: zglosnaduzycie@fnp.org.pl.

The Foundation requires the safeguarding and careful storage of primary research results, which should be based on verifiable testimony and be recorded in the form appropriate for the methodology of the scientific field. Moreover, the FNP expects responsible management of these data, including confidentiality and intellectual property rights. Responsible dissemination of results is one of the basic expectations of the Foundation. We not only want the results to be made public – e.g. in the form of publications or conference presentations – but we also expect them to be achievements of high quality, recognized in international circulation. Finally, we are committed to the responsible protection of intellectual property rights in the case of results that can be commercialized.

Social Engagement

Bringing scientific discoveries closer to society is an important aspect of science. The 2007–2015 SKILLS project served to support scientists in popularizing and communicating scientific content to non-specialists, among other things. The Foundation actively promotes its beneficiaries' achievements on its website, in traditional and social media, and at FNP events. In 2016, we established the Prof. Maciej W. Grabski Award for activities in promoting the understanding of science in society. This award may be given to persons who promote and explain methods of scientific inference, present the impact of science and scientists on the civilizational development of Poland, show in an accessible manner the results of research work, disseminate scientifically-proven arguments in the public debate, and educate the public on the distinction between “good” and “bad” science, namely research based on a reliable method and rational inference from research that does not meet these criteria.

One of the forms of disseminating scientific knowledge and reinforcing the understanding of the role of science in society are regular meetings conducted by the Foundation, during which authors of monographs published by the FNP partake in a public discussion with other specialists and answer questions from the public. In 2021, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Foundation strived to explain to the public the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and its prevention, including vaccination. A series of public debates were organized in which experts explained the state of current knowledge on viruses in an accessible way. We want to continue to help develop a research-based public understanding of the issues that are important to society and to science.