

Summary

Survey of the laureates of the START stipend programme of 2021

Dorota Juszczuk, Marta Łazarowicz-Kowalik

October 2022

This study was conducted in order to explore the influence of START stipend on the course of academic career of its young recipients. The START stipend programme was established by the Foundation for Polish Science (FNP) in 1992. It is being offered to young, most promising researchers, who are in the final years of their PhD or have just been awarded their PhD, as a recognition of their exceptional academic work. One of its aims is to encourage those young researchers to fully commit themselves to academic work. The stipend is awarded for one year and there are no restrictions as to the stipend expenditure. The FNP START stipends are awarded in a multi-staged process. Each year, approximately 1000 young researchers apply for the stipend and of those, around 100 are successful (10% success rate). In 2021, the stipends amounted to 28000PLN.

The current study took form of an anonymous survey. The main areas explored were stipend's effects and future career plans of the recipients. The questionnaire included a set of questions on the application process, perceived attractiveness of the stipend, its perceived value, and comparison to other stipends offered to young researchers. In order to compare the results with the results of previous similar surveys conducted by FNP, some of the questions used were based on those used in previous surveys. New survey questions were also added in order to address the new evaluation needs of FNP. The survey used both open and closed questions.

100 young researchers who were awarded the stipend in 2021 were invited to take part in the survey. The survey was completed by 74 researchers (74% response rate). Women were half of the sample (52,7%). 80% of the sample had completed their doctoral training, while the rest of the sample were not yet awarded a PhD. The age of the respondents ranged from 27 to 33 years.

Nearly all of the respondents are currently pursuing academic careers and only two respondents have moved their careers beyond academia. Of those who pursue a career in academia, 93% work in a research institution. In most cases, respondents are based in Poland (80%), 11% work simultaneously in Poland and abroad and 3 people work abroad. The vast majority of respondents are satisfied with their decision to pursue career in academia and there seem not be differences in this regard by gender or represented scientific area. Similar results were obtained in a previous

survey of researchers who were awarded the START stipend between 2008 and 2012. The evidence obtained showed the levels of satisfaction with the decision to remain in academia were high. 90% of all respondents felt their decision was rather good or definitely good. Similarly, neither gender nor research area were related to the level of satisfaction with the decision to continue academic career.

In the current study, the majority of respondents (81%) were convinced that they will pursue a career in academia in the future. Plans to quit academia remain very rare and only one respondent was certain in this regard. Nevertheless, one in five respondents (18%) is currently considering quitting his/her academic job, but does consider further academic work as a possibility. This outcome is different from the findings obtained in previous years. Among those who were awarded the START stipend between 2008 and 2012, 60% of respondents were certain regarding their decision to stay in academia, while 30% planned to stay in academia (but were not excluding other job options/opportunities). It is possible, that on one hand, young researchers are concerned about low level of pay in academia, and on the other hand, they are more optimistic about finding well-paid employment outside of academia. It is also possible that some of the respondents would prefer not to commit fully to pursuing a career in academia only.

Majority of the surveyed young scientists feel the START stipend had a positive effect on their future career plans. Only 15% of all respondents felt it had not affected their career plans. The qualitative evidence obtained suggests that financial aspects were not a key feature of this reward. The most common reported effects of the stipend are: the perception of being awarded a prestigious stipend, increased motivation to continue working in research area and perceived sense of encouragement and appreciation of their work.

A high share of respondents seem to be satisfied with the stipend application process – while submitting an application for the stipend they did not encounter any major issues, positively rated the stipend application scoring, and did not have issues while communicating with FNP with queries related to the application process. The fellowship has also received positive ratings because there are no restrictions on spending of the stipend. Importantly, 75,7% of respondents have applied for other sources of funding which may suggest that those who received the START stipend are motivated and determined to work in academia and invest considerable personal resources into their academic career development and apply for grant funding. It is also possible that being successful in obtaining the START stipend encouraged them to apply for more research funding.