

Summary

Applicants' evaluation of FNP competitions

Marta Łazarowicz-Kowalik i Aleksandra Czerniawska

Warsaw, December 2017



Study

The aim of the study was to examine the Foundation's competitions from the perspective of the participants. The quality of its competitions is of vital importance for the Foundation, whose role in the system for supporting science in Poland rests largely on its standards for assessment of applications. In case of the Foundation, as with many other grant-making institutions, over 80% of applicants do not receive funding, which results primarily from the limited resources and intense competition for funds. Considering the time and effort invested in preparing and filing applications, and the disappointment which these efforts often lead to, it is worth examining whether the Foundation has taken the appropriate efforts to facilitate the application process for scientists and to ensure transparent competition procedures, including clear criteria, impartial, competent evaluation, and adequate feedback. Although the main aim of the competitions is to select applications for funding, with the proper process the evaluations also serve as a tool for training and motivating researchers. Finally, it is essential that the Foundation, as an institution implementing the *European Charter for Researchers* and *Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers*, treats scientists responsibly and with due respect for their work.

The basic question related to how competition participants assess their experience of seeking funds at FNP. The study was conducted in August 2017 using computer-assisted web interviewing, distributing a questionnaire to all applicants in the first three editions of the FIRST TEAM, TEAM, TEAM TECH, HOMING and POWROTY/REINTEGRATION programmes, regardless of the results of the competition. The questionnaire enabled an analysis of responses in the context of specific programmes, and by the sex and career stage of the respondents. The survey was conducted in both Polish and English in order to reflect also the opinions of foreign respondents and, as far as possible, to compare them to the opinions of Polish respondents.

Key conclusions

The general assessment of FNP's programmes came out very favourably. The respondents rated highly first and foremost the prestige of the Foundation, the amount of the funds offered, and the objectives and assumptions of the programmes. The assessment of openness to innovative projects, e.g. carrying a high risk, proved somewhat worse.

According to the respondents, FNP's programmes combine support for basic and applied research. Some of them perceive this as a huge advantage and valuable supplement to the system of supporting science in Poland. For others, the Foundation's expectations in this respect are unclear.

FNP's programmes were hailed as "a unique offer of funds enabling the building of research teams." The Foundation was praised particularly for enabling researchers to establish their own research team at an early stage in their career. On the other hand, the programmes were criticized for having too-short periods for implementation of projects. The respondents took the view that short timeframes are hard to reconcile with the cycle of educating doctoral students and a proper recruitment process. They also do not reflect the need to assemble the necessary equipment (via public procurement), which often proves unavoidable, particularly in the case of researchers coming from another institution or another country.

No significant differences were observed in the assessment of the Foundation's offerings depending on the career stage or sex of the respondents. Nor did the assessment of Polish and foreign respondents reveal significant discrepancies. With one exception: foreign respondents perceived greater opportunities for obtaining funds through FNP than Polish respondents did.

The opinions of persons seeking funding from FNP strongly depended on the results of the competition: respondents who obtained funding were decidedly more satisfied with all aspects of the offerings and competitions of the Foundation than those who did not receive funding. This applies to the assessment of prestige but first and foremost to the openness to innovative projects and the quality of the evaluation of applications.

The quality and accessibility of information about FNP competitions was rated decidedly positively, by both Polish and foreign respondents. They appreciated the Foundation's offer of assistance in preparing applications and informational meetings, which are also held abroad.

A decisive majority of respondents (75%) said that they did not encounter problems at the stage of preparing applications. They were regarded as simpler than average, and the application process at FNP as similarly time-consuming as at other grant-making institutions.

Among the suggestions for simplification of FNP's application and the application process were importing data from prior applications and dividing the application process into two phases: the first would require only a summary description, while only applications qualified for the next stage of evaluation would require a full description.

Over 90% of respondents who had encountered problems completing the application declared that they had obtained the assistance they needed from the Foundation. The very high assessment of the support from programme officers was notable. This applied to both filing the application and all successive stages in the competition. The respondents particularly praised the helpfulness, quick responses to email questions, and patient explanations by telephone. Even in the case of persons whose applications did not pass to the next phase in the competition, these assessments were quite positive.

Most of the respondents also rated highly the clarity of the assessment criteria. While there were evident differences between the assessments of those whose applications passed to the next phase of the competition and the others, also in the case of failure the assessments were relatively high. The highest rating of the criteria was at the stage of the written reviews. In the case of assessments by panels, doubts were raised as to the correct application of the criteria, while opinions on this topic were raised by respondents on the basis of feedback.

The worst opinion, compared to other aspects of the competition procedure, was for the feedback obtained by participants, particularly after a negative result in the competition. This applied primarily to the information on the panel evaluations. The most often stated complaints concerned the excessive generality and lack of concrete objections. The respondents would like to know which place they took in the ranking and how many points they lacked to achieve success. They would also like to be told the strengths and weaknesses of their application and to receive tips on how to improve the application. In this respect, direct discussions with the programme officers, who provided more detailed information, were rated higher.

When asked whether the reviews proved helpful for improvement of their projects, most of the respondents said yes. As in previous analyses, the final result of these reviews affected the evaluation of the usefulness of the reviews. But this dependency is not obvious: respondents whose applications dropped out at this stage of review were more likely than those applications passed to the next stage to believe that there was no need to improve their projects and that the reviews were not helpful because they lacked essential substantive value.

The respondents were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to dispute the assessments of the panel and the reviewers (except for the last stage of the competition, the Interdisciplinary Panel of Experts). The appeal process at FNP, limited to procedural issues, is regarded as illusory and not enabling real questioning of the evaluations received.

A decided majority of the respondents felt that they were treated in the evaluation process impartially and with respect. They also appreciated the ability to present their project and to discourse with the reviewers and panellists during the Interdisciplinary Panel of Experts. The evaluation of the substantive level of the assessment was lower, with critical opinions expressed primarily by persons who did not pass to the next stage of the competition or did not receive funding. The comments point to a highly varied level of the reviews received. Objections also focused on the issue of the composition of the Interdisciplinary Panel of Experts and its competence to evaluate the applications in the given field of research.

The reasons for failure in the competition most often cited by respondents were “limited funds in the competition/large number of good applications” (23%) and “errors or irregularities in assessment of the application by the reviewers/panellists” (21%). Sixty percent of respondents who received funding intend to seek funding from FNP again.