



Werkgroep Onderzoek & Universiteit

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Action points Work group R&U

Research, together with education, is one of the core tasks of the university. We are dealing with it day in day out. The fact that research is close to the heart for many people was highlighted by the numerous reactions and animated discussion we received at the occasion of the startup meeting of the work group Research & University ('Onderzoek & Universiteit') on March 27th 2009. This internal debate shows how much we, academics, care about our research. We see an inseparable bond between education and research but ask for the necessary cohesion in the diversity of the research in the three groups. We also worry about the relation between the research policy in Leuven and Flanders.

With the input of your reactions, but also based on many individual meetings – both with knowledge and policy makers – we have refined our action points and summarized them in this text. For reasons of simplicity we choose to write two texts. In this one we discuss the research policy of the K.U.Leuven. In a later, second text, we'll formulate action points for the research policy in Flanders.

We stand up for

1. More transparency and active participation of our scientists in the University research policy

The research policy at the K.U.Leuven is mainly carried by the vice-rector for research and three councils: the Council for Research Policy (ROB), the Research Council and the IOF-council¹. The mission of the ROB is *'to provide suggestions on the university's research policy under development, its execution and to act as a sound board and advisory organ for proposals formulated by the governing organs'*. The primary task of the research and IOF councils is the division of the money of respectively the special research fund (BOF) and the industrial research fund (IOF), mainly through evaluation of the submitted project proposals.

In our opinion, the ROB does not fulfill its job properly at this moment. It is regarded by many of its members as merely a source of information. The ROB should focus more on the research policy itself and do policy preparatory work, not only on tangible dossiers but also discuss the underlying principles. The ROB is the ideal place to, timely, discuss plans of the government before they take definitive shapes, e.g. through the representation in the Flemish council for Research and Innovation policy (VRWI).

In order to promote the transparency and performance of the ROB and to fulfill its mission, an altered composition is needed. It needs to be populated with a healthy mix of researchers with and without policy responsibility, a mix of chosen and appointed members. Knowledge makers with an interest in research policy are preferably attracted through open calls.

The involvement in the research and IOF council can be increased by writing out open calls to attract new members, keeping in mind the balanced composition of each council and the relevant competencies of the candidates.

Finally, decisions on research policy need to be taken by the Academic Council. It is important that the Academic Council not only treats factual dossiers but also discusses the underlying principles.

An increased transparency on the entire research policy can be reached by making reports and advices of the policy organs accessible on the web.

An increased transparency on the project selections can be accomplished by providing clear feedback for all project evaluations. Time consuming visitations by the research council could be replaced by a one-time right for rebuttal by the applicant. Evaluations with active participation can lead to useful adjustments, without this active participation they often lead to frustration.

2. A larger weight for research efficiency and qualitative parameters for all research evaluations and internal allocations

We all believe that excellent and creative research should be rewarded and stimulated. But how do we best accomplish that?

The impact of research cannot be measured only by the quantity of the output, like the number of publications, the impact factors and the number of citations. In case this does happen, large groups are privileged over small (excellent) groups, purely on the basis of their size. This is the so-called Mattheus-effect. Moreover, creative and innovative research is, especially in the startup phase, very poor in output. Output is a quantitative parameter that can only be measured once the research is (partially) completed. Output measurement therefore offers very few possibilities for continuous monitoring and adjustment.

In order to prevent this, we plea for the measurement of the research efficiency on the one hand and the use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative parameters on the other hand.

- The research efficiency measures the ratio between the measurable result of the research (output) and the available financial means (input). Rightly one can say that obtaining competitive financing should be considered as part of the output. We ask that the 'Steunpunt O&O indicatoren' investigates the impact of the use of research efficiency in evaluations. In foreign institutions (e.g. in the UK) research efficiency is already in use.
- Research efficiency is a quantitative measure. By incorporating qualitative parameters (e.g. peer review and/or external visitation) in the evaluation, strong and weak sides of the research can be discussed. This way the additional efforts in establishing interdisciplinary collaborations can better be taken into account in the evaluation. In our opinion, qualitative evaluation contributes to improved participation of the knowledge makers and facilitates adjustment and performance enhancement.

3. University structures that encourage dynamic and interdisciplinary research

For historical and organizational reasons, our university is structured in groups, faculties and (for Science Engineering & Technology and Biomedical Sciences) in departments. However, research is constantly innovative and hard to fit into organizational structures. That's why every rigid or closed structure holds the risk of inhibiting interdisciplinary collaborations on the one hand and emerging talent on the other hand. In our opinion it is a permanent task of the ROB to guard the balance between a workable structure and the research dynamics.

4. Doctorates in which quality predominates over quantity

A PhD student is both a researcher and a student and needs to be optimally supported on both levels to be able to start working as an independent researcher at the end of the PhD. This implies both monitoring the quality of the PhD process (the PhD training) and the result (the performed research).

During the PhD training, a PhD student has to be given the opportunity to fully develop him/herself as an independent researcher. This can only be achieved through qualitative guidance, amongst others via functioning talks with the promoter and an actively participating thesis advisory committee ('begeleidingscommissie'). The PhD candidate has to be evaluated timely (within the first year) and objectively such that the opportunity remains to make adjustments or quit the PhD. We think it is an essential part of the PhD process to write at least one publication as a first author. This is a personal enriching experience and an obvious (international) recognition of the student's work.

Promoters need to be trained in guiding a PhD and their performance in doing so should be evaluated. Via exit-talks the causes of failure of failed PhD's need to be pinpointed in order to improve the PhD process where needed.

5. An accessible research middle management

The university is currently establishing a much needed research middle management ('onderzoekskader'). Contrarily to the original plans, no solidarity fund for the joint sharing of the social reserve has been created. This implies that offering a contract for unlimited duration is only possible for very wealthy research groups. This leads to a factual discrimination between researchers at our institution. Creating the solidarity fund should make the middle management option accessible to smaller, profitable, groups.

6. The multilingualism of all students, lecturers and researchers

There needs to be a functional differentiation in the use of different languages. The language of research can often be English, the government language of our university is Dutch. Each member of the ZAP should obtain proficiency in Dutch. Internal communication should be in Dutch, with an English translation included. The quality of the English communication and the availability of English documents and regulations needs to improve. Hereto, sufficient means and central support should be provided.

7. A revision of the mobility criterion

A successful international research stay provides a solid intrinsic added value. However, it should be a bonus and not an obligation. Meaningful mobility should be stimulated.

¹ More information on these councils can be found at <https://admin.kuleuven.be/raden/index.html#oz>