

Management response to the evaluation of the Talent Programme & Rubicon

NWO's Talent Programme (Veni, Vidi, Vici) aims to encourage talented, creative researchers to carry out groundbreaking and innovative research. The programme, which previously operated under the name Innovational Research Incentives Scheme (in Dutch: Vernieuwingsimpuls), has been providing funding for 25 years to researchers at various stages of their careers, with a particular focus on scientific and, where possible, societal impact. The programme funds both fundamental and applied research and is open to researchers from all scientific disciplines. Rubicon enables talented researchers who have recently obtained their PhDs to gain experience at a research organisation abroad for one to two years. This increases their chances of continuing their careers in science.

NWO is a learning organisation. That is why monitoring, evaluation and learning are key steps in the implementation of our funding process. Sometimes evaluations are agreed upon at the start of a programme; sometimes they are assigned by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (for example, the evaluation of NWO) or the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy; and sometimes NWO initiates evaluations itself in order to provide informed guidance for the further development of a particular programme or policy. The evaluation of the Talent Programme and Rubicon was carried out on NWO's initiative. It is important to note that the conclusions and recommendations in the report focus on Veni, Vidi and Vici and are only of limited applicability to Rubicon due to its smaller scale. The NWO Executive Board is pleased to take this opportunity to respond to the report and the recommendations.

NWO commissioned the research and consultancy firm Dialogic to carry out the evaluation. An internal and an external advisory group were also involved in the evaluation process. The internal advisory group consisted of NWO directors responsible for the Talent funding line and Evaluations in their portfolios, the policy coordinators for the Talent and Rubicon programmes, and the Healthy Research Culture coordinator. The external advisory group comprised of researchers and members of the management or governing bodies of research and stakeholder organisations. Both advisory groups were given the opportunity to validate a draft version of the evaluation report. Dialogic considered the feedback and incorporated it where necessary and/or appropriate. Dialogic was given complete freedom in this regard; they carried out the evaluation and wrote the report independently.

The results of the evaluation are encouraging. NWO endorses the main conclusion that the Talent Programme¹ is indispensable and effective for early-career researchers as a route to conducting independent research. The evaluation shows that the Talent Programme has an important position within the Dutch research system and is complementary to the Open Competition of NWO, ERC grants and institutional career support schemes. Without the programme, a significant funding opportunity would be lost, particularly for early-career researchers. It fulfils a systemic function, and policy decisions taken within the framework of the Talent Programme have knock-on effects for other funding bodies and research organisations.

The 2017–2024 evaluation period was a time during which a number of substantial policy changes were implemented in the Talent Programme, including changes to the programme's objective and name, the introduction and further development of the narrative CV (to an Evidence-Based CV) and a revised structure for the assessment procedure. These adjustments were made at the time to ensure

¹ In this response, as in the evaluation, we also refer to Rubicon when we mention the Talent Programme, for the sake of convenience.

the programme better aligned with the needs of the research community. In particular, we are pleased to note the following positive conclusions:

- The two-phase structure has proved to be an excellent addition, leading to significant efficiency gains.
- The Evidence-Based CV (EBCV) works well as a tool and, following its use in the Talent Programme, has also been adopted elsewhere. The EBCV contributes to the objectives of Recognition & Appreciation (R&A).
- The extension clause is viewed positively and appreciated by the researchers.

Alongside the positive findings, we acknowledge and recognise the observation that the Talent Programme is not without its challenges. We are grateful to the evaluators for their suggestions regarding potential improvements to the programme and will carefully consider the findings and recommendations set out in the report. The evaluation report also highlights systemic challenges surrounding the Talent Programme, relating not only to the pressure of submitting applications and the effects within the system arising from the scarcity of research funding, but also to the (excessive) importance attributed to the Talent grants in career development and how receiving a grant or a rejection impacts researchers' careers. NWO recognises its significant responsibility in this regard. However, the science system is a shared responsibility of NWO, the research organisations and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. We look forward to taking the necessary steps together to improve the science system.

The evaluation is being published at a time when the NWO strategy for the period 2027–2030 is nearing completion. The Talent Programme, and the subject of 'talent policy' in the broadest sense, is one of the key areas we will be addressing in the coming years. In doing so, we are also taking into account the response from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science to the NWO evaluation, which includes the request for UNL and NWO to present a joint plan by the summer of 2027 setting out measures to reduce the pressure on the system.

Finally, NWO would like to emphasise once again that we are very pleased with the predominantly positive evaluation of the Talent Programme by Dialogic and that we will take the recommendations to heart and consider them carefully. We greatly appreciate the input provided by all respondents via the surveys, interviews and focus groups. Special thanks are due to the members of the external advisory group who advised Dialogic on several occasions.

Yours faithfully,

Prof. Marcel Levi
President of the NWO Executive Board

Appendix: The Growth of Talent – evaluation report NWO Talent Programme