

Advice from the Young Academy Groningen on the Implementation of the Starter and Stimulation Grants

The YAG Policy Working Group

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Context

In 2022, Minister of Education, Culture and Science Robbert Dijkgraaf announced his plans for large-scale investments in higher education to create ‘peace and space’ (*rust en ruimte*) for fundamental research. One of the main policy instruments included in these plans are the “Starter and Stimulation” grants (*starters en stimuleringsbeurzen*, sometimes translated as Starting and Incentive grants). The introduction of these schemes was seen as a step in the right direction to address structural issues such as work overload; however, as far as the **Starter grants** are concerned, it quickly became clear that there would not be enough funds available to support all eligible staff members. De Jonge Akademie (DJA) also [voiced their concern](#) about the implementation of the grants system. In a nutshell, DJA argued that the Starter and Stimulation grants would inevitably lead to more competition, thereby defeating their own purpose. The risk of creating a ‘Matthew effect’ (i.e. accumulated advantage) is also present, and this might increase existing inequalities in academia.

The Young Academy Groningen (YAG) shares these concerns. If not implemented correctly, the proposed schemes risk increasing inequality between academics. It could lead to a ‘lost generation’ of young academics who missed out on competitive grants (e.g. NWO Veni or Vidi grants) in previous years, but are no longer eligible for the starting grant. Taking all these challenges into account, we want to encourage the University of Groningen to make the best of these new schemes by addressing existing issues that have been affecting early career researchers for years. Indeed, despite their challenges, the Starter and Stimulation grants offer a window of opportunity to significantly improve working conditions.

Our advice below acknowledges that some decisions are still to be made by the Minister of Education, for instance with regards to the recipients’ eligibility for subsequent NWO/ZonMw funding. We, therefore, focus on how the Starter and Stimulation grants can be best implemented within the University of Groningen in order to address concerns voiced by early career researchers across different faculties. We also acknowledge that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution, as all faculties and domains have their specific cultures (and needs). Hence, our advice includes several, non-mutually exclusive, options that each faculty can use for the implementation of these grants.

Starter grants

As per the [Bestuursakkoord](#), **Starter grants** are made available to assistant professors who are newly appointed to a permanent position from 1 January 2022 onwards. A Starter grant is fixed to €300,000 over a maximum period of six years. This grant is available for both direct research costs (such as salary costs for a PhD student, the use of a lab assistant, data engineer, the use of laboratories and other research facilities, etc.) and indirect costs associated with the research (such as administrative costs, office space, etc). The indirect costs amount to a maximum of 20% per Starter grant.

Eligibility criteria for a starter grant are:

- Applicants have been appointed to a permanent position as assistant professor (Universitair Docent);
- The appointment of the applicant is at least 0.7 fte, with at least 0,2 fte dedicated to teaching activities.

More specific eligibility criteria may be added by specific universities, such as not receiving a Starter grant at another university, introducing a specific eligibility window once contracts become permanent, and getting a formal approval from the assistant professor’s direct line manager.

If two or more assistant professors use their obtained Starter grants for one joint research, it is possible for them to get a top-up of €40,000 max per collaboration. This national funding scheme is structural and amounts to €156 million per year. It has been already acknowledged that this amount will not be sufficient to cover all eligible assistant professors, especially given the current implementation of the Sector Plans, thanks to which a large number of new assistant professors are being appointed.

According to the Bestuursakkoord, recipients of a Starter grant should not be eligible to apply for NWO or ZonMW subsidies. However, at this moment it is not yet clear whether, and if so, how this rule will be implemented. A national working group has been installed to advise on this matter.

Stimulation grants

In contrast to the Starter grants, ***Stimulation grants*** are offered to assistant professors, associate professors and full professors with permanent contracts. The eligibility criteria are, therefore, more flexible.

The amount of a Stimulation grant is variable. A researcher can receive a grant of up to €300,000. This amount is available for direct and indirect costs (see above) associated with their research. For indirect costs, a maximum of 20% per Stimulation grant applies.

Another core difference between Starter and Stimulation grants is that the latter funding scheme is **not** structural. It is intended to run from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2030. The amount allocated per year is also slightly lower than for the Starter Grants (€144 million per year).

What the YAG did to prepare its advice

In addition to internal rounds of discussions between members, the YAG consulted with different stakeholders across the University of Groningen and beyond in order to produce the advice below.

- Emails were sent in December 2022 to all faculty boards to offer input and understand each faculty's vision. We received a positive response from 9 faculties. We have held and will be holding a series of meetings with faculty boards, deans and/or vice-deans between January and February 2023.
- Stephan Van Galen, Secretary General of the University, discussed the state of play at the YAG's monthly meeting in January 2023.
- The YAG Board further consulted with De Jonge Akademie by email. A subsequent meeting was held between the CvB, DJA and the YAG Chair on 25 January 2023, in which a brief discussion on the implementation of the Starter Grants took place.
- The YAG Chair attended a meeting of the local Young Academies on Tuesday 31 January 2023 in Utrecht. The state of play across different universities was presented and discussed. Our advice further draws on best practices and policy documents shared between Young Academy representatives at this meeting.

Advice and opinion

In light of these discussions, the YAG makes the following recommendations:

Transparency

Because it is clear that the available resources will not be sufficient to give ‘peace and space’ (*rust en ruimte*) to all eligible academics, we urge the Faculty Boards to allocate the Starter grants using mechanisms that are as transparent and fair as possible. Unclear or obscure allocation mechanisms can compound the already difficult situation for many early career researchers. In this sense, it is highly advisable to develop communication strategies that clearly describe the available resources, the processes and mechanisms for allocating them, and the challenges involved.

It is also expected that Starter grants will ‘boost’ the career and promotion prospects of those benefiting from the scheme. This carries the danger of fostering resentment among ineligible staff members. We therefore recommend that Faculties undertake a broad and inclusive process of considering how the Starter and Stimulation grants and their effects will be considered in promotion and recognition processes.

Team Science

Even though the Starter and Stimulation grants are allocated to individuals rather than teams, they can foster collaboration between researchers within and across different research groups. In the spirit of Recognition & Rewards, the YAG recommends that the grants are used to foster research teams, rather than allocating them solely to individual researchers. As such, several young faculty may profit from the stimulus. When awarded to teams, the grant regulation will still require one nominal recipient of the grant. As such special attention needs to be paid to how 1) the team members profit equally, regardless of the nominal recipient (i.e through shared supervision of a PhD candidate, having the right to include the grant on their CV’s); 2) what happens when one of the recipients leaves the university; 3) procedures in case the collaboration does not develop in the aspired direction.

Encouraging PhD supervision

Across several faculties, the limited opportunities to supervise PhD students has been flagged as a problem by early career researchers, especially because funding opportunities are becoming increasingly scarce. However, PhD supervision is an important part of the academic profession, and in many cases it is part of the core promotion criteria for assistant professors.

The Starter grants offer an opportunity to overcome this issue. We therefore recommend using these grants to fund PhD positions under the supervision of assistant professors who have not received such an opportunity yet.

In practice and in line with our advice on promoting Team Science, one could envision joint applications that would allow two early career researchers and a senior researcher (given the *Ius Promovendi* requirements) to be involved in supervising a PhD student. Furthermore, one could consider using Team Science through Starter grants to stimulate interdisciplinary collaboration if early career researchers from two different research institutes or faculties are involved. This option might be particularly beneficial for faculties with fewer Starter grants available. The YAG will soon publish a report on its extensive experience with interdisciplinary PhD projects.

Modified lottery (single ballot or weighted)

Existing funding schemes yield increasingly low success rates. Several studies have highlighted the high levels of subjectivity in allocating grants solely through peer-reviewing (see for instance [Johnson 2008](#); [Fang and Casadevall 2016](#); [Jerrim and de Vries 2019](#); [Roumbanis 2019](#)). Alternatives have been sought for years and some small-scale experiments took place across universities and faculties.

The Universities of Maastricht and Twente have used lotteries for the allocation of Starter grants. Based on these experiences, we suggest implementing a so-called ‘modified lottery’. Under such a modified lottery system, assistant professors who meet the requirements for a Starter grant and wish to apply have to fill an application form, following specific criteria set by each faculty. These eligibility criteria can be used to address existing issues (for instance access to PhD supervision, reducing workload) or promote research strategies (such as Team Science). An application form template is available in the Appendix.

Eligible applicants are then included in a lottery draw. Two techniques can be used: one single ballot per application, as used at Maastricht University, or a weighted lottery (allocating two or more ballots to applications that meet specific criteria, such as the inclusion of a PhD student or collaboration between several early career researchers), as used at the University of Twente.

This lottery system was proven to be very successful at both Maastricht and Twente from the perspectives of management and applicants, and it did not yield complaints within the early career researcher community, as the process was deemed fair. This mechanism will be used in subsequent rounds. The perceived unfairness can be addressed by allowing unsuccessful applicants to enter subsequent draws, in order to increase everyone’s probability of receiving a Starter grant. A weighted lottery could also allow these unsuccessful applicants to increase their chances of getting a grant in subsequent draws. From an administrative perspective, a lottery also limits the extra costs required to assess such applications (for instance by setting up selection committees).

All types of research should be eligible

Some faculties might consider tying access to the Starter and Stimulation grants to strategic themes included in their strategic plans. We believe this would exclude a significant proportion of eligible assistant professors who believe their research does not fit in such themes. Therefore, we recommend leaving the research theme open-ended, in order to avoid hindering research creativity and avoid unfairness.

Avoiding the trap of a ‘forgotten generation’

The Starter grants’ eligibility criteria are fairly strict, as they only apply to newly appointed assistant professors. This means a significant proportion of early career researchers appointed or getting a permanent position before January 2022 will miss out. Yet, many of these early career researchers also deserve to get some ‘peace and space’ to develop their research agenda. In order to provide fairness, we recommend prioritizing their access to the Stimulation grants.

Several schemes could be introduced to ensure the fair allocation of such grants. It could draw on the NWO’s Open Competition XS programme, for instance, by offering smaller grants (capped at €50,000 in this case) to more individuals or, in the spirit of Team Science, groups. In all cases, those wishing to receive a Stimulation grant should clearly demonstrate that it will produce a positive impact on their workload.

If Faculties allow for the possibility of increasing research time by reducing teaching obligations through the Starter or Stimulation grants, this could lead to an increase in the amount of academic staff hired on

temporary contracts as replacements (mostly *docenten*). In the spirit of Recognition and Rewards, we recommend that those temporary hires also benefit from the ‘rust en ruimte’ provided by the Starter grants by giving them some research or professionalization time, based on their career needs.

Exploring structural options for ‘near miss’ funds

Given the strict eligibility criteria for starter grants and the perennially low success rates for highly competitive funding mechanisms (ERC and NWO), we recommend faculties to set up ‘near miss’ funds, to recognise early career researchers who are “almost eligible” for starting grants and also reward the efforts of those who almost obtained funding (for instance: a score of minimum ‘very good’ at NWO level, making it to Step 2 at ERC level or getting a ‘seal of excellence’). Providing structural solutions that also incentivise researchers to keep on seeking external funding while reducing the overall pressure on acquiring grants is important.

Importantly, ‘near miss’ funds would allow faculties to think strategically, beyond the starter and stimulation grants. These ‘near miss’ funds already exist in some faculties. For instance, FSE introduced the “FSE Research Grants” of either €150,000 (to co-fund a PhD student) or €75,000 (with less strict requirements) for unsuccessful applicants (at assistant professor level) who submitted a proposal between 2021 and 2024. The introduction of such a scheme has been most welcome by the early career community within the FSE and is allowing for the exploration of new research lines which would be otherwise not possible to pursue.

We strongly encourage other faculties to explore possibilities for similar ‘near miss’ funds, albeit adapted to their own disciplines, possibly by considering using the Stimulation grants and the *promotiepremie* derived from Starting grants as a way of kickstarting such mechanisms.

Conclusion

We hope this advice will help faculties make a decision on how to best implement the Starter and Stimulation grants, keeping in mind that the funds remain limited. We would like to emphasize that the YAG is available to contribute to faculty-specific decisions or provide further advice regarding their implementation or the introduction of the ‘near miss’ funds mentioned above. As ambassadors of the early career community at the University of Groningen and through our relationship with the national and other local young academies, we can act as the ‘connecting dots’ to ensure these grants are distributed in the fairest and most optimal way possible.

On behalf of the Young Academy Groningen,

The YAG Policy Working Group

APPENDIX - Starter grant application form template

This template draws on the procedure used at Maastricht University. We are grateful to the Maastricht Young Academy for sharing their experience and best practices. It can be amended by each faculty to include our suggestions above.

1. Administrative details

a) Applicant details

Full name:

Department:

Email address:

b) Please specify your current appointment (total fte, split out in research and teaching and - when applicable - your clinical appointment at UMCG):

c) Start date of permanent position: dd/mm/yyyy

d) Duration of grant (max. 6 years):

e) Application seen by department head: yes / no

Please briefly summarize the feedback of the department head on your application

2. Information on the research for which the grant will be used

Please use max. 1 page, Arial, 11 point for this section 2. Descriptions under the headers can be deleted.

Research Title

Please give a title (maximum 20 words) to your project

Research Idea

Briefly describe your research idea.

Team Science

If applicable, please indicate how your research is team science, and with whom you intend to collaborate. This is a general question on how your research links to the work of others, how other research is related to yours, and how you share tasks and responsibilities in your work. This question is independent of a possible application for a top-up.

Top-up

Please indicate if you wish to apply for a top-up of €40.000 in total. Please provide the name and faculty of the other applicant, and briefly describe the collaborative part of the proposal. Note that a top-up will only be awarded if both applicants will receive a Starter Grant. The top-up will be divided equally between the applicants involved.

3. Reducing workload

Please use max. ½ page, Arial, 11 point for this section. Please specify how your application results in a reduction of your work load. Also describe the effect of your application on the work load of the team you are part of. In case you wish to increase research time by reducing your teaching tasks, please indicate the remaining size of your teaching tasks, which should amount to at least 0,2 fte per year.

4. Budget estimate

Please include your budget estimate below. Please contact your Finance department if you need support for the preparation of the budget.

| | Budget | Top-up (if applicable***) | Explanation |
|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Staff | | | |
| Research staff (e.g. PhD student*, Postdoc) | | | |
| Increase research time by reducing teaching obligations and/or other tasks (e.g. clinical tasks) | | | |
| Research support staff (i.e. technician, research assistant) | | | |
| Other Research related costs | | | |
| Material costs (including investments in equipment and consumables) | | | |
| Outreach activities | | | |
| Publication costs (e.g. Open Access fees) | | | |
| Other research related costs | | | |
| Costs not yet specified** (max 10%, i.e. €30.000 + €2.000 in case of top-up) | | | |
| Indirect Costs (20%) | €60.000 | €4.000 | This percentage is set by RUG as per the Bestuursakkoord and is non-negotiable. |
| Total | €300.000 | €20.000 | |

** If you intend to appoint a PhD student, please include the name of the full or associate professor who is willing to be the first promotor*

*** You are allowed to leave some unforeseen expenses, up to a maximum of €30.000 or, in case a top-up is awarded, up to a maximum of €32.000.*

**** When you apply for a top-up, you are asked to indicate here how you intend to spend this additional funding. Note that the amount is €20.000 since the €40.000 is divided over the recipients, and that the top-up will only be awarded when both applicants involved are awarded a Starter Grant.*