

FWF Scientists Survey 2013 Executive Summary

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Introduction

In the summer of 2012, the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) commissioned the Institute for Research Information and Quality Assurance (iFQ) to carry out a survey of academic staff at universities and non-university research institutes in Austria. The main topic of the survey is third-party-funded research. In detail, the focus is on application behaviour, application success, the level of awareness of funding institutions, in particular familiarity with the FWF and its funding provision (funding), and the academics' and researchers' opinions of the FWF's aims and principles and its selection procedures – both in relation to the selection of expert reviewers and to its presumed and desired criteria for making research decisions. Some of the questions for the survey were taken from the survey already carried out in 2002 by the market research institute *SPECTRA*.

Alongside these topics, which relate in the widest sense to the academic tasks and aims of the FWF, another aspect covered by the survey is the evaluation by Austrian academics and researchers of FWF's service performance. Among other things, it deals with the FWF's facilitation of ongoing projects, the duration of the application procedure and FWF's provision of information.

At the same time, the iFQ's survey of academics and researchers (survey of professors at German universities), carried out in 2010 jointly with the German Research Foundation (DFG) provided the model for individual questions on opinions of the FWF's decision-making behaviour. This in turn goes back to the higher education staff surveys of 1976/77 and 1983/84 by the Allensbach Institute (IfD Allensbach), making international comparison possible.

Further questions were also taken over from the DFG survey on the topic of academic misconduct, an issue which has become particularly prominent in the media in recent years, thus also taking a significant place in internal academic discourse. This part of the questionnaire was not related to the FWF; it dealt generally with the experiences of academics and researchers, so the findings are not included in the report on the FWF survey. They will be published separately by the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI).

Methods

The survey of academic staff in Austria (FWF survey 2013) was carried out in the form of a census. With only a few exceptions, the invitation of participants was decentralised, being carried out through the universities and non-university research institutions, using a procedure designed to preserve confidentiality of respondents' email addresses. To carry out this procedure, the institutions send a standardised invitation letter to their staff by email, which contained a link to the survey. The survey was hosted on the server of research company uzbonn GmbH, which carried out the technical side of the survey. This guaranteed that it was not possible at any point to establish a link between the email address and the respondents' statements.

Results

The aim of this study was to gather data on Austrian academics' and researchers' behaviour in relation to third-party funding and their opinions of third-party funding, both in general terms and specifically in relation to the FWF's work. The focus was in particular the level of familiarity with the FWF and its funding activity, its reputation among Austrian academics and researchers, the latter's FWF-related application behaviour and their opinions of the FWF's aims and principles. Further important topics were the respondents' opinions of the formal organisation of the FWF's selection procedure and the criteria applying to it. In the following sections, the core findings are briefly summarised and presented.

Respondent group and representativeness

A total of 6,273 of the invited researchers responded to the survey link; of them, 3,087 answered at least 75 percent of the questions. Measuring by the headcount of university staff given by Statistik Austria (uni:data) for 2012, this indicates a response rate of 20.0 percent among university professors and 5.9 percent among other academic staff (at universities). In terms of unit non-response, comparison with known population parameters (Statistik Austria, uni:data, FWF's own data) showed that in the group of respondents, staff in disciplines which have little affinity with third-party funding tended to be under-represented and staff who had applied successfully to the FWF were slightly over-represented ("beneficiary bias"). Therefore particular attention was paid to these characteristics when evaluating the findings and existing differences in the response behaviour of the groups mentioned was emphasised.¹

Level of familiarity with the FWF and its prestige

The findings prove the FWF's great significance for externally-funded fundamental research in Austria. Almost all of the respondent academics and researchers are familiar with the FWF, which is ahead of other national funding institutions by a wide margin.

¹ For methodological reasons, a subsequent 'redressment' was not carried out (see Section 1.2: p.10 of the main report).

The same applies to the fact that individual projects/research projects constitute the core line of FWF funding. Almost every academic and researcher knows of this type of funding. The same applies to the FWF's other funding types, in so far as they are oriented on particular subject groups, such as KLIF: they are certainly well-known among their respective target groups (academic fields), although not so well known to all respondents.

As well as being very well-known, the FWF also enjoys a great deal of respect and prestige among respondents. Over 30 percent attribute the highest level of prestige to the FWF, closely followed by the ERC with just under 30 percent. Differences in respondents' academic fields played a large part in the attribution of prestige. Over 40 percent of respondents in the humanities and life sciences attributed the highest level of prestige to the FWF while "only" 20 percent of respondents in the technical sciences did so. As a supporter of fundamental research, the FWF has a less significant role in the more application-oriented technical sciences.

Submitting applications and reasons for not applying (Section 2.3)²

Of the respondents who gave information on their application behaviour, 57 percent have submitted at least one application to the FWF in the last five years; at least 70 percent of them were successful with at least one application. On average during this period, 1.4 applications were filed per respondent and 2.4 per FWF applicant.

But what causes some academics and researchers to refrain from submitting an application to FWF? The main difference here is between respondents in different academic positions. For professors (40 percent) and assistant professors (47 percent) who did not apply, the primary reason for this is that they consider the time and effort involved in submitting an application too great in relation to the risk of a refusal. The application issue does not arise for 33 percent of the postdocs and 45 percent of staff without a doctorate, because their superiors takes on this task.

Reasons which the FWF sees as critical, such as lack of confidence in the objectivity of the assessment procedure or the opinion that the FWF only funds "mainstream research", were only mentioned as a reason by a relatively small proportion of respondents (5.5 percent and 7.5 percent respectively). (Nevertheless, the majority of respondents consider that "mainstream research" is a positive funding criterion; see below). Similarly, only a tiny minority consider the funding sum too small to be worth applying for (less than 1 percent).

Funding requirements and their coverage by FWF provision

While fulfilling its main function, the distribution of research funding, the FWF follows other (secondary) funding policy targets through its provision. An additional question, therefore, was how far the academics' and researchers' funding requirements are covered by FWF provision.

By far the biggest requirement, in the respondents' view, is funding for junior academics and researchers. At the same time, funding of junior academics and researchers revealed the greatest discrepancy between perceived need and its coverage by the FWF's provision. Almost 90 percent see a great or very great need in this area, while only approx. 37 percent see this need *fairly well* or *completely* covered. In this area, obviously, existing FWF provision

² Section and page numbers are referring to the main report.

is considered inadequate by a relatively large proportion of respondents – this incidentally applies independently of their familiarity with the FWF’s programmes specifically for junior academics and researchers (Schrödinger programme, Firnberg programme etc.). Respondents see a less marked but nevertheless clear deficit in provision in relation to funding for transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, international networking and international collaborative projects.

Opinions of the FWF’s principles / guidelines (Section 2.4.1)

The FWF orients its work according to particular principles, such as the commitment to excellence and competition, independence of interest groups and compliance with ethical research standards. To determine respondents’ opinions of these principles and of the FWF’s further role in the Austrian research landscape, opposing statements (“pairs of opposites”) were presented as extreme poles on a five-level scale.

According to this, respondents from all academic fields expressed positive views on the FWF’s initiative to observe ethical research standards.

In addition, respondents were of the opinion that the thematic orientation of FWF-funded research should be subject to academic and scientific self-monitoring, as a way of countering the influence of politicians and other interest groups. (FWF aim: “creating space for independent academic work and research”). In a wider sense, too, the FWF should take on the role of the representative of the academic world’s interests vis-à-vis politicians.

The group of respondents was rather undecided, with some slight discipline-related differences, in relation to FWF funding for research into socially relevant topics in their own programmes. Social scientists tended to reject this; natural scientists and other disciplines were undecided on this point.

Respondents in the natural sciences, life sciences and technical sciences had a very slight tendency to reject the introduction of set budgets for disciplines, on the other hand, while the humanities and social sciences were rather undecided on this point (Fig.18).

Perceived and desired criteria for funding decisions

Almost all respondents consider that the academic quality of applications to the FWF should be the most important factor in their assessment. Respondents consider that this is basically the case. At the same time, however, respondents consider that high-ranking international publications in fact have just as much significance as the academic quality of the applications, which does not entirely correspond to their ideals.

The biggest discrepancy between the ideal criteria and the assessment of their actual significance is found in relation to the criterion “conforms to current mainstream research”. Respondents consider “mainstream” to be just as significant a criterion for funding decisions as the criterion they consider second in importance, “originality”; however, they clearly reject it as a criterion.

The second-biggest discrepancy is in relation to “experience of submitting applications”. In the respondents’ view, this criterion has the same significance for FWF funding decisions as originality and degree of innovation, but they reject it to the same extent as they reject academic mainstream.

Evaluation of the decision-making procedure and selection of expert reviewers

The previous section dealt with the criteria for the selection of projects to be funded. Although respondents perceive that their ideals of relevant criteria are not completely fulfilled in the FWF's funding decisions, they are to a great extent identical with the criteria specified or aimed for by the FWF. This leads directly to the issue of how the process of selecting expert reviewers and thus the selection process for project applications should be designed in order to ensure that the target criteria which are generally agreed on should be implemented to the greatest possible extent.

The FWF pursues precisely this target through its consultant system, the appointment of exclusively international reviewers and the rejection of discipline-specific budgets, among other things. However, the respondent's evaluation of these organisational principles reflect differentiated views. While almost all respondents are strongly in favour of a "wide range of international reviewers", they are undecided about whether the reviewers should *only* be recruited from outside Austria. The question of whether it is important that reviewers are familiar with conditions in Austria also received inconsistent answers. In contrast, respondents tend to be in favour of the anonymity of reviewers and of the consultant system.

Apart from the issues of the selection of the reviewers and the consultant system, there is one issue on which respondents are unusually united: the desire for an opportunity to make a statement on the report before the final acceptance decision (rebuttal procedure, p. 35f). 74 percent of respondents agreed with this demand *fully*, a further 23 percent *partly*.

Understanding rejections (Section 2.4.2 d)

To what extent could respondents understand why their applications to the FWF were rejected? According to the information given, only 27 percent of respondents with experience of *both* rejection *and* acceptance can understand the rejection of their application. Among respondents who had *only received rejections*, as few as 13 percent can understand why. There seems to be a link between application success and the level of understanding; nevertheless, as many as 47 percent of successful applicants found their rejections incomprehensible.

Additional evaluation of these figures (Section 2.4.2, p. 39) indicated that the lack of understanding of rejections cannot be explained by frustration with rejections. Nor is it associated with doubts about the importance of the criterion of academic quality; instead, it tends to be related to the commentaries and hints of the reviewers or the reports themselves.

How far this finding is simply due to different ideas of the reviewers and the applicants on content, methodology and quality, or whether changing the formal requirements regarding the FWF's reports and commentaries could result in making rejections more comprehensible, is still an open question, however.

Quality of service and consultation (Section 2.4.2)

In addition to the more academic aspects of the FWF's work covered so far, the FWF's and its secretariat's service performance and information provision were also topics of the

survey. In this area, the FWF receives particularly positive evaluations for the quality of its consultation and the good organisation in processing the applications, although once again, unsuccessful applicants gave slightly less positive assessments than successful ones. The improvement in the evaluations in comparison to the SPECTRA survey in 2002 is very impressive, moreover – particularly in relation to the quality of consultation and support for ongoing projects (Fig. 25d).

The FWF's information provision (Section 2.4.2)

The FWF makes use of a range of channels to disseminate information about its work. Respondents were asked to indicate how informative they found each of the central information paths. The proportion of respondents who did not feel able to make any judgement on the information content of the FWF website (proportions in the category “don't know”) was very small, proving its overriding importance in comparison with other information provision. Besides, the information content of the FWF website was evaluated as very informative.

In contrast, there is a relatively large proportion of “don't know” answers in relation to other forms of information provision. However, these forms of provision are generally more difficult to access. For example, coaching workshops and other information events usually require active participation: e.g. information seekers must download the annual report or take out a subscription to the FWF newsletter in order to be able to judge them. With the exception of the job vacancy database, there are also clear differences in opinion here between academic positions. Overall, professors seem to be much more familiar with the overall FWF information provision than post-docs and the academic and artistic staff who do not have doctorates.