Sustainable careers in a context of project based funding
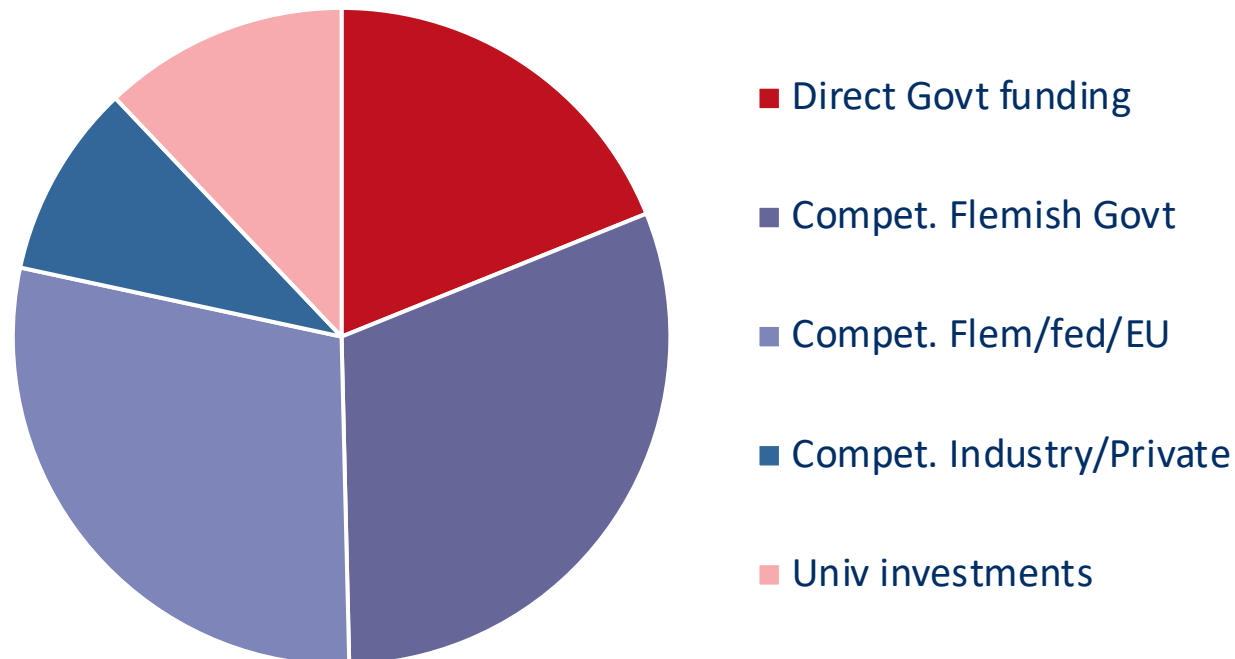
Insights from Antwerp University
YERUN lunchtime series 23/6/2023

Karen Vandevelde, Head of HR

Changing context of higher education & research funding

- Steady increase in student numbers

- Huge increase in research funding

- Huge increase in number of externally funded research staff; while the number of staff funded on the university's operational budget, has increased only marginally

2022 Research budget Antwerp University

- Direct Govt funding
- Compet. Flemish Govt
- Compet. Flem/fed/EU
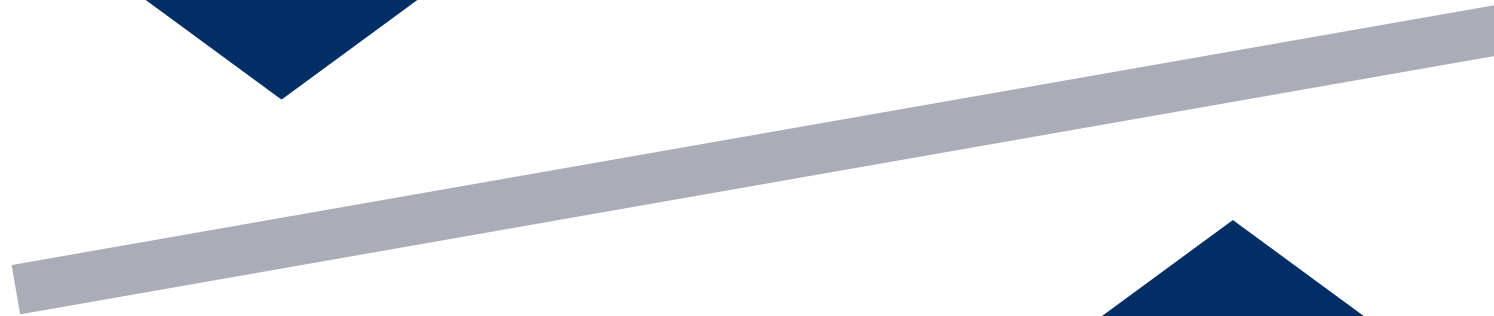- Compet. Industry/Private
- Univ investments

Project-based competitive research funding

Benefits

- Ensuring quality
- Ensuring transparency
- Ensuring innovation

Disadvantages

- Inefficient in terms of time & effort
- Precarious in terms of careers
- Makes academia unattractive as a sector

How do we address this challenge at Antwerp University?

- **Only 1/3rd of our research budget allows for long-term career perspectives – and most of these must be teaching/research combined positions**

- Antwerp Doctoral School & Antwerp University Talent Center **support researchers in their skills training & career development**

- We encourage **honesty and clarity** about what career expectations are realistic and desirable, given the context we work in

- We encourage research teams & PI's to pool resources and **give a limited number of researchers real long-term perspectives**, based on a risk analysis of a research team's viability

Universiteit
Antwerpen

Proposed "Framework for research careers"

- **High-level policy attention for research careers (DG RTD) and more broadly careers in academia (DG EAC) has been welcomed very strongly**

- Question: are we seeking solutions in **the right direction**?
  - Proposed solutions target PI's and university employers: pressure to provide long-term contracts
  - EC's "fixed term directive" (1999) is difficult to implement when the funding source for contracts is precarious
    - Every MS has implemented this directive differently – in some MSs with increasing pressure on research career opportunities
    - Universities are affected more than research institutes or private companies, because they are almost entirely dependent on competitive funding in order to fulfil their research responsibilities

- While these measures are implemented with the best intentions in mind, we are concerned that these commitments will lead to **little effect – or even opposite effects**

- Meanwhile, PI's are under **increasing pressure to keep the funding coming in** so their researchers can continue working as researchers…

- And academia becomes a place that **spends more time on acquiring funding than on carrying out research**

Universiteit Antwerpen

Could we do better?

- **Universities cannot solve this alone**

- **We will continue to need project-based research funding** to ensure new, innovative ideas and to give space to "newcomers"

- In addition, **promote more imaginative and new ways of funding research**, such as the following good practices:

  - European & National governments: selective number of top-level research groups with **renewable block grants**, just like some research institutes are (e.g. Flanders: IMEC & VIB)

  - Funding agencies (EC is a role model!): dare to switch to a stronger component of **life-cycle funding**, i.e. renewable funding cycles where, once awarded, continuation of funding relies on periodic quality control and not on further competition (e.g. Flanders: Methusalem)

- **Listen to researchers and their PI's**. Their concern is not new:

  - **Vaesen K, Katzav** J (2017) How much would each researcher receive if competitive government research funding were distributed equally among researchers? PLoS ONE 12(9): e0183967. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0183967

  - **Ioannidis, J.** Fund people not projects (2011). Nature 477, 529–531. https://doi.org/10.1038/477529a

Sustainable careers to support high-level research

- A **better understanding** amongst relevant stakeholders – researchers, governments, funders and institutions - on the pressure points of research careers in universities will help to design better solutions

- **We share a common goal**: to ensure continued levels of innovation, we must provide attractive career career paths for researchers, in particular in universities

Universiteit
Antwerpen