



Draft recommendation by EUR's Starter and Incentive Grant Advisory Committee

To : Executive Board, Executive Board Deans
From : Starter and Incentive Grant Advisory Committee
Date : June 2023

This recommendation and its background

The administrative agreement concluded between the Minister for Education, Culture and Science and the Dutch universities and universities of applied sciences outlines the institution of two new instruments designed to promote research projects and make it easier for researchers to obtain research grants without incurring a heavy workload, competing with many others and writing time-consuming grant applications. The new instruments have a permanent component (the Starter Grants) and an incidental component (the Incentive Grants, which cover a ten-year term). On a more specific level, the award of the grants means that, starting from 2023, Erasmus University (EUR) will have €22 million annually to be allocated to Starter Grants¹, as well as €13 million to be allocated to Incentive Grants.

The Ministry has identified several purposes on which the additional monies are to be spent and has presented Dutch education institutions with an expenditure framework. EUR's Executive Board has opted for a short and long-term approach in which the allocation and expenditure of the monies to be used for Starter Grants for 2022 and 2023 is directly in line with the Ministry's allocation system (allocation based on student numbers). Other than the expenditure framework defined by the Ministry, EUR has not imposed a particular expenditure framework on the faculties.

In order to determine how the monies are to be allocated and to draw up an EUR-specific expenditure framework for subsequent years (including the monies for the Incentive Grants to be awarded in 2022 and 2023),¹ the Executive Board established the EUR-wide Starter and Incentive Grant Advisory Committee (hereinafter referred to as 'the Committee'). The Committee was asked to issue a recommendation on:

1. The allocation of the monies designated for Starter and Incentive Grants to the various EUR faculties, commencing 2024.
2. The expenditure framework for the Starter and Incentive Grants for 2024 and beyond.

The Committee's objective is to enable EUR to attain the relevant targets specified in the administrative agreement (EUR's mission statement and strategic plan) to the best of its ability. In addition, the Executive Board asked the Committee to take the following things into account:

- ensuring that EUR researchers are both doing research and teaching,
- policies that are proposed should be in line with the recognising and rewarding programme,
- Open & Responsible Science (O&RS) should be stimulated.

¹ The Committee would like to point out here that the Executive Board has the option of using the temporarily frozen budget for Incentive Grants for 2022 and 2023 to address any imbalances that may have resulted from the allocation of the Starter Grants for 2022 and 2023.

Background

The Starter Grants and Incentive Grants are the outcome of a proposal entitled *Rolling Grants: Balance in the Science System*, drafted by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), in which the key objective was defined as follows:

'The objective of the new rolling grant fund for personal research is to offer assistant, associate and full professors on permanent contracts greater confidence and continuity, to counteract purely project-based research and to promote innovative, personal research.' In addition, the KNAW proposed the establishment of the fund to help reduce heavy workloads and reduce the number of researchers applying for NWO grants.

The expenditure framework (what, specifically, is the money being expended on?) for Starter Grants was defined by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and allows universities less scope to impose their own additional criteria than the expenditure framework for Incentive Grants. Starter Grants are subject to the following requirements:

- Must be awarded to assistant professors² on a first permanent contract (at least 0.7 FTE). The associate professors must both teach and conduct research (with the teaching duties amounting to at least 0.2 FTE).
- The grant is worth €300,000, to be expended over a 6-year period on directly research-related costs (e.g. PhD students' wages, rent of research locations, personnel), with up to 20% being able to be reserved for costs indirectly related to the research project.
- Each researcher can only be awarded one Starter Grant over the course of his/her career.

Incentive Grants are subject to the following requirements:

- Must be awarded to current assistant, associate and full professors on a permanent contract.
- In principle, Incentive Grants can be awarded to researchers more than once over the course of their career.
- The grant is worth €300,000, to be expended on directly research-related costs (e.g. PhD students' wages, rent of research locations, personnel), with 20% being able to be reserved for costs indirectly related to the research project.
- It is up to the education institution itself to determine the criteria for the award of grants to researchers working in research groups. The following rule applies to this situation: *'The guiding principle in this matter is that the Incentive Grants are to be used where workloads are the heaviest and where there is the least opportunity for personal research.'*

Recommendation

General comments

Prior to issuing the requested recommendation on the allocation and the expenditure framework, the Committee would like to share a few general observations and recommendations with the Executive Board.

- The original Weckhuysen plan ('rolling grants') mainly focused on creating more opportunities for researchers to conduct research without being dependent on external granting agencies.

² Erasmus MC employees are subject to an additional requirement: in order to be eligible for a grant, they must be medical specialists with a doctorate who must be on a contract worth at least 0.7 FTE and spend at least 0.2 FTE of their time on research and teaching.

However, several objectives were then added to the administrative agreement, such as reducing academic staff's heavy workloads. However, the Ministry's expenditure framework mostly focuses on the original objective – promoting personal research.

- The various faculties have different needs. The Committee would like to emphasise here that the faculties must have enough opportunity to decide for themselves how to allocate the Starter Grants and Incentive Grants.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science asked a committee chaired by Prof Weckhuysen to issue a recommendation on how to use Starter Grants and Incentive Grants. However, this recommendation will not be issued soon, and the Committee hereby advises the Executive Board not to wait for the Weckhuysen Committee's recommendation in its decision-making on the Starter Grants and Incentive Grants.
- The education institutions are expected to provide the Ministry with information on how the grants are allocated and spent. The Committee would like to emphasise that a robust, and preferably very easy-to-use, accountability system is essential in this regard, both on the university-wide level and on the faculty level.

Recommendation on Starter Grants

Allocation

2022 and 2023

The Committee endorses the Executive Board's decision to allocate the Starter Grants for the initial years, 2022 and 2023, to the faculties based on their numbers of students. However, this model will also result in some faculties not being able to award all their Starter Grants (since they do not have enough newly appointed assistant professors) and in certain other faculties only being able to award some of their newly appointed assistant professors a Starter Grant.

2024, 2025 and beyond

An analysis of staffing trends at the various faculties shows that – following a brief increase in the initial years – there will be a slight decrease and stabilisation in the number of assistant professors who are eligible for a Starter Grant. In addition, the overview demonstrates that all newly appointed assistant professors could in principle be awarded a Starter Grant. After a thorough analysis of the various parameters involved, this fact caused the Committee to recommend that, starting from 2024, the monies available for Starter Grants be allocated on the basis of the number of researchers appointed to assistant professorships on a permanent contract for the first time (as these are the researchers who will be eligible for a Starter Grant). The numbers reported in spring 2023 will serve as a point of departure for 2024 and 2025. The Committee would like to point out here that, starting from 2025, there will be annual or biennial monitoring designed to determine whether the allocation model is still in line with the actual number of assistant lecturers appointed, and whether the model needs revision. In principle, the mechanism of allocating funds in accordance with the number of assistant professors should remain intact. The proposed monitoring will also be necessary to prevent faculties from hiring a disproportionately large number of assistant professors (be it consciously or subconsciously) just so as to have more chances at being awarded Starter Grants. The faculty-specific Talent Management Plans are to serve as the guiding principle for the monitoring effort.

Expenditure framework

The expenditure framework specified by the Ministry in the administrative agreement contains opportunities for two complementary scenarios that are not mutually exclusive, with one scenario

mostly designed to directly strengthen the faculties' research positions by appointing several temporary researchers (such as PhD students). The second scenario mostly focuses on relieving academic staff's heavy workloads by temporarily transferring certain aspects of certain duties (such as teaching duties) to others. The Committee advises the Executive Board to adopt the scenarios outlined below as the guiding principle in designing EUR's expenditure framework, and would like to point out specifically that the two scenarios are not mutually exclusive and that hybrid scenarios may be devised.

Scenario No. 1: hiring temporary research staff, such as PhD students.

In the first scenario, faculties get to strengthen their research position by spending the Starter Grants on the appointment and remuneration of new PhD students³. The Committee would like to emphasise that it is vital that the PhD students and their research projects be in line with what the faculty does, thus ensuring that their research projects contribute to the efforts of a broad range of researchers. In this scenario, PhD students can be appointed for a 4 or 5-year period, which would allow them to make a significant contribution to the department's teaching duties (up to 20%), which would in turn reduce the teaching burden for other researchers. Formally, grants must be allocated to individual assistant professors because this is how the Ministry wants them accounted for, but ideally, each grant would benefit several researchers, in line with our ambition of promoting team science. This model could also help the university promote collaboration with other researchers within a particular faculty, and promote interdisciplinary research as well.

Scenario No. 2: relieving heavy workloads

The second scenario is designed to give those assistant professors who have been given their first permanent contract more time and opportunity themselves to conduct personal research and relieve their heavy workload. This can be done by allowing these newly appointed assistant professors to transfer some of their teaching duties to a colleague who has both teaching and research duties (dual duties). In this scenario, several Starter Grants can be used to appoint new assistant professors who will (temporarily) perform more teaching or management duties.

Recommendation on Incentive Grants

The Committee found that there are five major differences between Incentive Grants and Starter Grants:

- First, Incentive Grants are not permanent funding, but rather with a term of approximately 10 years.
- Secondly, the education institution has more of a say in the allocation of the grants – all assistant, associate and full professors on a permanent contract are eligible.
- Thirdly, the Incentive monies can be used for Starter Grants, but the other way around is not allowed.
- Fourthly, the amount of the grants to be allocated may vary (although they are capped at €300,000).
- Fifthly, researchers can receive more than one Incentive Grants over the course of their career, while Starter Grants may only be allocated once in a researcher's entire career.

³ Obviously, faculties can use the monies to appoint postdoctoral researchers instead – but in that case, the grants will not cover all the costs involved.

The guiding principle imposed by the Ministry is that the Incentive Grants are *‘to be used where workloads are the heaviest and there is the least opportunity for personal research’*.

Allocation of the Incentive Grants

2024 and beyond (the allocations for 2022 and 2023 have been temporarily frozen and are included in this recommendation – see also page 1 and footnote).

The committee has explored the use of various parameters to allocate the monies for the Incentive Grants and has concluded that two parameters – student numbers and total number of research staff – are appropriate parameters that can be used. The Committee found however that the allocation of the Incentive monies to the faculties, based on *either of two* parameters (student numbers/ total number of research staff) that make researchers eligible for Incentive funding does not result in a satisfying outcome. In and of themselves, student numbers can serve as a measure for the perceived heaviness of a lecturer’s workload, but they also result in a relatively low award rate for faculties with a high percentage of researchers (who will accordingly have more difficulty to get a grant application honoured as there is more competition for grants). Allocation on the basis of the total number of researchers in terms of FTE will give an impression of the number of assistant, associate and full professors⁴ eligible for an Incentive Grant. However, if this is the only criterion used to decide to whom the monies are to be allocated, we are not sufficiently taking into account that lecturers at some faculties have a heavier teaching workload than lecturers at other faculties. The Committee advises the Executive Board to take both parameters into account and to assign them equal weighting.

The Committee also finds that the problems of heavy workloads, too much competition in grant applications and limited opportunities for personal research are different in nature, scope and cause at the Erasmus MC from the faculties at the Woudestein Campus (including ISS). As a result, the Committee advises that, when it comes to the allocation of Incentive Grants, Erasmus MC the boards of the Erasmus MC and EUR should engage in a direct negotiation on what percentage should be allocated to Erasmus MC.

Expenditure framework

Apart from variable award amounts, the expenditure framework imposed by the Ministry with regard to Incentive Grants does not differ from that imposed with regard to Starter Grants. The Committee advises that the two scenarios outlined above also be used for the allocation of the Incentive Grants. It should be noted here that these two scenarios are not mutually exclusive and that hybrid scenarios may be devised. In addition, the monies may be spent on other purposes, such as research infrastructure, data databases, etc.

The Committee recommends that the faculties use their own strategic research plans as a guideline in deciding who is eligible for an Incentive Grant and how the money is to be spent. The Committee would like to emphasise that it is vital that the faculties indicate clearly in which way the Incentive Grants will help them attain the goals outlined in their own strategic research plans. Once again, the guiding principle is that the Incentive Grants are *‘to be used where workloads are the heaviest and there is the least opportunity for personal research’*.

In addition to the two scenarios, the Committee recommends the following with regard to certain additional aspects of the way in which the Incentive Grants are to be spent:

- Amount of the grant

⁴ This parameter will be determined by the employment figures presented annually in October.

The Committee recommends that no small individual grants be awarded, but that the faculties be granted the opportunity instead to create one or more specific funds to which researchers can turn to funding (without too much administrative red tape) for personal research, e.g. funding allowing them the time to write a grant application.

- Allocation by means of internal competition.
The Committee feels that researchers who are eligible for an Incentive Grant must explain in brief what purpose is to be served with the grant, how the grant money will be spent and how the expenditures will be accounted for. However, the Committee would advise the Executive Board not to establish any internal competitions involving the assessment of applications.
- Promoting O&RS, Recognising and Rewarding Valued Employees (including 'team science')
The Committee feels that the 'recognition and rewarding' and O&RS should not be, in and of themselves, purposes on which the Incentive Grants are to be expended. However, when awarding their grants, faculties may choose to impose certain conditions on awardees with regard to OR&S (including the familiar assessment by an ethics review committee and a Data Research Management Plan). This means that grant awardees will be explicitly asked to provide information on the percentage of their publications that will be published on open access sites (and in accordance with the Taverne Amendment), the percentage of data sets that will be publicised in accordance with FAIR principles, etc. The general principle is that grant awardees must explain their methods. The Committee recommends not imposing a standard that may have consequences for grant awardees. In addition, Incentive Grants allow researchers to diversify their career pathways and develop particular knowledge in these fields.
- How Starter Grants and Incentive Grants are interrelated
The Committee advises the Executive Board not to impose any restrictions on researchers who have already received a Starter Grant. Allow such researchers to apply for an Incentive Grant afterwards if necessary.

Recommendation on allocation of 20% overhead

Please note: the recommendation below is a concise reflection of the discussion held by the SSB Committee on 26 May 2023. A more detailed version of this recommendation will be appended to the final draft of this recommendation.

The Committee would like to point out that it expects the lion's share of the costs associated with the award of the Starter and Incentive Grants to be borne by the faculties. This involves matters such as supporting researchers as well as monitoring the faculties' expenditures.

This being the case, the Committee would like to recommend that the Executive Board allocate the lion's share of the 20% reserved for indirect costs (overhead) to the faculties. The Committee believes that naturally, additional budget will be required at the centralised level to allow the university to account for the expenditure of the monies to the Ministry. The Committee advises that manpower be allocated and budgeted for these reporting duties. The Committee also suspects that some faculties will request more support from service units such as ERS (particularly with regard to the Incentive Grants awarded). However, this explicitly does not apply to all faculties.

Those faculties that wish to receive additional support/services should pay for them from the budget assigned to them, which can also be used to finance interfaculty (infrastructural) collaboration.

There are several ways in which the 20% overhead (approx. €7 million annually in total) can be allocated. The Committee would like to suggest two possible scenarios, each of which involves reserving at least 10% for unforeseen events. This reserve account must always have enough money in it, but once it contains the right amount and no one applies for any of it, no further deposits need be made into it.

The two possible scenarios are as follows:

1. The university-wide service units indicate how much extra budget they will need to establish the systems (particularly the monitoring system) associated with the Starter and Incentive Grants, and this percentage of the funding will be reserved for the university-wide service units concerned. The remainder will be allocated to the faculties.
2. A minimum percentage that must be allocated to the faculties will be agreed (the Committee suggests a percentage in the 70-80% range). The remaining 20 to 30 percent (minus the percentage needed for the unforeseen events reserve) can be used to support the university-wide service units.

In conclusion

In conclusion, the Committee would like to impress on the Executive Board that the Starter and Incentive Grants are an important instrument that will change the university. The monies will have a great impact, particularly because they are here to stay. The Committee would like to emphasise that it is crucial that the situation continue to be monitored in the long term. For instance, the Committee feels that it might be a good idea to establish a permanent Starter and Incentive Grant Committee that can monitor (and issue recommendations on) the way in which the funding is to be spent, in association with the Executive Board.

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