

ZOOM

RESEARCHERS AT BELGIAN UNIVERSITIES

DRIVEN BY CURIOSITY, BUT CONFRONTED WITH TIME PRESSURE AND PARADOXES

How do researchers at Belgian universities view their role in society? What drives them? Which obstacles do they encounter? What factors determine the quality of their research? How do they handle ethics, questions of diversity and gender, open access and public engagement?

The King Baudouin Foundation carried out an online survey among academic researchers. A total of **1720 researchers from all Belgian universities** took part in the survey. It is **the first large-scale**

survey to ask academics in Belgium about these issues.

Researchers at Belgian universities don't do it for the money, a flashy career, the honor, fame and glory or for a good pension. They are driven by curiosity, the desire to produce new knowledge or the aspiration to respond to existing and future societal needs. In their everyday work, however, it is not easy to meet the expectations placed on them by the academic system and society.



AT A GLANCE

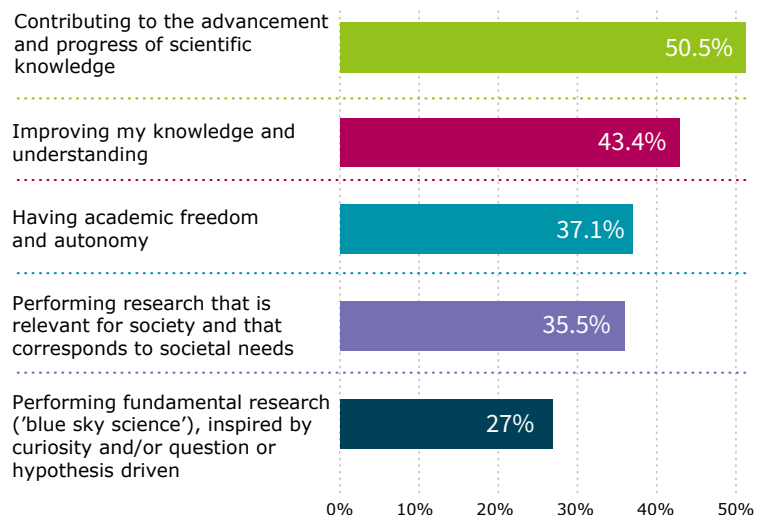
Researchers at Belgian universities care about their **autonomy and academic freedom** and absolutely want to retain these. Nevertheless, they struggle with a number of **dilemmas and paradoxes**:

» Many of them focus on research that is socially relevant and meets the needs of society. At the same time, however, adequate attention and resources must be devoted to 'blue sky' or fundamental research.

» While researchers feel hampered by competition among them for funding, they are willing to collaborate with other researchers. They would like to publish their research in open access journals, but it is important for their careers and funding to publish in high-impact journals.

» Researchers strongly value interaction with stakeholders and society, but they don't want it to be at the expense of scientific autonomy and integrity. By no means all of them find the perfect balance between their academic duties - research, teaching and providing a service to society.

What drives researchers at Belgian universities?



(Each researcher was allowed to choose three responses from a list of fifteen.)



FACTS AND ANALYSIS

WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY?

- » A total of 1720 researchers completed the online questionnaire, representing about 3.5% of all researchers working at a Dutch-speaking university and 6.5% of those working at a French-speaking university.
- » There is a balance between men and women among the respondents (52.6% men, 47.4% women) and between north and south (54% are linked to a French-speaking university and 46% to a Dutch-speaking one).
- » Four in 10 of them work in the social sciences/humanities (36.7%). The remainder are distributed evenly between natural (18.7%), biomedical (22.2%), and technological and applied sciences (including bio-engineers) (22.4%).
- » Almost one in two is a pre-doctoral researcher (45.4%), one in five is a post-doctoral researcher (19.1%), one in three is employed as 'staff researcher' (9.2% are 'lecturers/assistant professors'; 23.6% are 'associate professors or professors').

PURSUING YOUR OWN COURSE

The concepts of autonomy and academic freedom are a themes running right through the whole survey, together with the conviction that scientific research should be of high quality, have a reproducible objective, be carried out with integrity and be reliable. **For 84.7% Of the respondents, scientific quality is seen as the most important criterion of all in evaluating and funding research projects.**

For more than half of the respondents, autonomy is very important in their everyday working life. **'I decide on my own research'** is with **51.3%** the number one answer to the question of who or what determines the choice of their research, followed by a 27.9% indicating that this research must be embedded in a research strategy of the research unit, group, department or university. This was followed at some distance by 'societal challenges' (7.6%) and 'public funders of research in Belgium' (6.2%).

QUALITY AND INTEGRITY UNDER PRESSURE

For 94% of the researchers, academic freedom contributes towards quality. At the same time, however, researchers feel squeezed between their own aims and the demands placed on them by the academic system and society. **For 87.3% of them there is a fear that increasing pressure may lead to 'compromises on research integrity and standards.'** These demands are expressed through a number of different responses:

- 54% do not have enough time to carry out research;
- 39.7% have difficulty finding a sustainable balance

between their three academic missions of teaching, research and providing services to society;

- 45.8% have difficulty with the way in which research proposals for funding are assessed; 36.3% with the way in which they are appraised;
- Only 23.6% consider governmental investments in research to be enough to have a positive impact on the quality of research;
- 54.3% consider that competition between researchers has a negative impact on the quality of research. Female researchers in particular mention this more often as an uncomfortable area.

THE MIDDLE RANK UNDER PRESSURE

It is mainly post-doctoral researchers and lecturers/assistant professors, the so-called 'younger middle rank,' who perceive the workload as mostly negative. **In particular, the continuous search for research**

financing and the low success rate of project submissions (even for research proposals with outstanding evaluations) is viewed as problematic.

"The greatest challenge is competition for limited sources of funding and the resulting lack of time to work on in-depth, meaningful research."

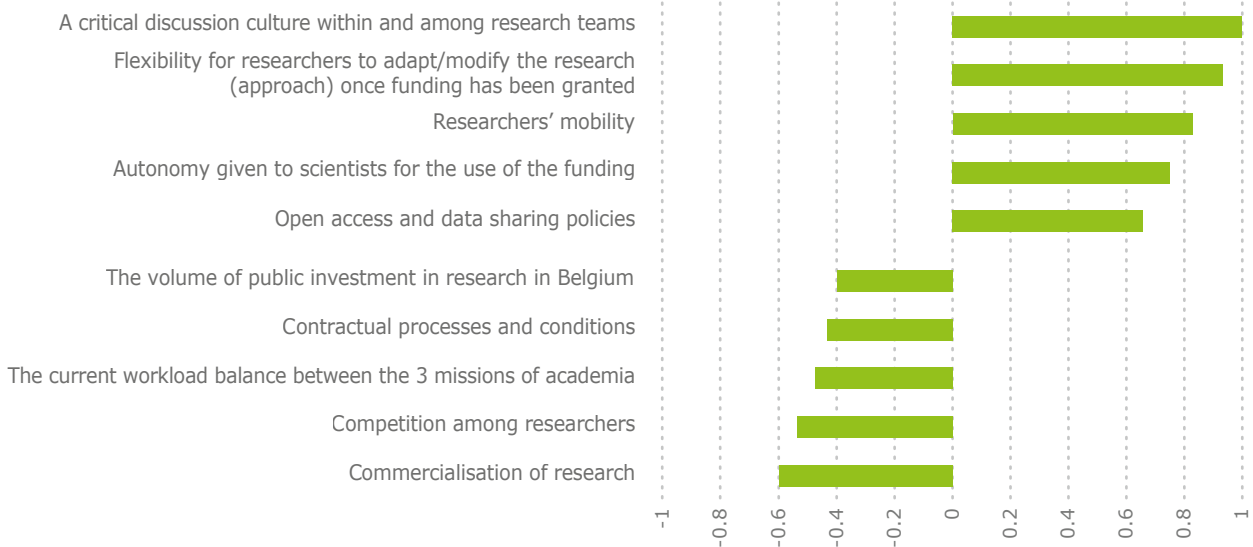
(Female, post-doctoral researcher, social and human sciences)

CRITICAL, INTERNATIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE

However, there are also various external factors that have a positive impact on the quality of research. Examples include the critical discussion culture within and among research teams, according to 73.6% of them, or researchers' (international) mobility (68.4%). Academic

researchers also value their contacts and collaboration with experts, inspiring colleagues and the opportunity to work in an international environment. Even though for 34.7% of them there are too few incentives to encourage multidisciplinary and collaborative research.

What contributes to the quality of your research? Top 5 of most positive and most negative factors.



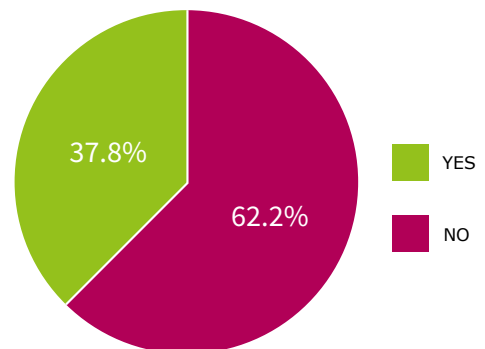
UNKNOWN QUALITY POLICY

The researchers question the contribution of structural measures to the quality and integrity of academic research. Although 62.2% of all the respondents are not aware that there is a policy on integrity in their own university, there are significant differences in awareness levels between the individual institutions.

"Researchers have to deal with the problems and challenges in society. Nevertheless, they must be given the freedom to research any solution that they consider to be worth addressing."

(Male Ph.D student, technological and applied sciences)

Are you aware of a Research Integrity Policy or a Research Integrity Commission at your institution?





RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

For a few years now the European Commission has been promoting a 'Responsible Research and Innovation' (RRI) program. The major topics relevant for RRI are open access, public and stakeholder involvement, science education, diversity and gender and ethics. A total of 41% of the respondents say that they are not very familiar with this RRI programme and 49% have never even heard of it. On the other hand, **a majority (57.9%) consider the principles of RRI to be relevant to their own research:**

>> Responding to societal needs -

for 35.2% of them, research should always be focused on societal needs and the perspectives of stakeholders. 59% doesn't agree, implying that fundamental research should remain possible. Research that is relevant to society scores more highly among women (44.1%) than it does among men (27.6%).

>> Stakeholders -

More than nine out of 10 of the researchers can see the usefulness of contacts with other stakeholders. These contacts provide them with new perspectives and strengthen the embedding of science in the society. The researchers are discerning and selective, however, about which stakeholders they are willing to involve.

>> Open access -

The principle of publishing in open access journals is strongly supported. Researchers do, however, have serious concerns about the existing system of open access journals. The cost of pub-

lishing an article in them can be high and often these costs are passed on to the author. What is more, many open access publications have a low impact factor. Nevertheless, 70.8% of the respondents have never paid to publish in open access.

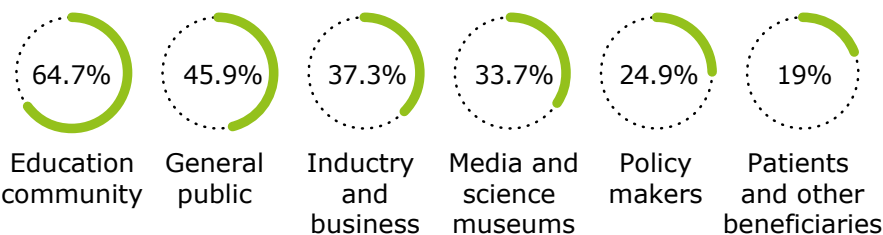
>> Diversity and gender -

Diversity, especially gender related questions, is still a sensitive topic in the academic world. The respondents do not take the issue of gender into account very much in their research. A minority of two in 10 indicate that they do integrate gender-related questions into their research.

>> Confidence of society -

45.9% are regularly in contact with the general public, 33.8% with the media. A third of them (35%) believe that the confidence of the public in scientific research has remained the same in the past 10 years, 18% consider that it has risen and 21.8% consider that it has fallen.

Stakeholder groups with which academic researchers have regular contact (i.e. min. 1x/year):



PUBLICATIONS BY THE KING BAUDOUIIN FOUNDATION:

- This Zoom gives a brief overview of the results of the study. The details can be found in the full report 'Researchers at Belgian universities: What drives them? Which obstacles do they encounter' (2017), Lut Mergaert and Peter Raeymaekers.
- 'Mind the gap! Multi-stakeholder dialogue for priority setting in health research.' (2016), Peter Raeymaekers.

You can download or order the publications free of charge on www.kbs-frb.be.

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