Inventory report of research evaluation practices (criteria and procedures) in FWB universities - July 2024

1. Good practices VS areas for improvement

A) <u>For research project</u>

Good practices ☀️

- **Transparency and visibility of procedures**:
  - Standardisation of calls for projects: all calls are generally posted on a **single web platform** with a **standard** presentation **template**.
  - For some calls, there is a single, **standardised application form**.
- **Feedback and rebuttal**:
  - Unsuccessful applicants generally have the right to discuss the decision with, for example, the Vice-Rector for Personnel Policy or the Pro-Rector for Research (usually on request).
  - For some calls, an evaluation report is sent to both successful and unsuccessful applicants.
  - Rebuttal following evaluation by international experts during the selection process for large-scale projects such as CRAs (Concerted Research Actions).
- Solicitation of **external/international evaluators** in parallel with the internal evaluation committee (which is often the research council) for some calls (particularly in the case of large-scale projects such as CRAs). These experts may or may not be remunerated (remuneration seems to motivate participation). This allows for additional peer review and double evaluation.
- Some calls are organised as a **second chance** following the results of external call evaluations (e.g. FRS-FNRS).
- Some calls use **random selection** for applications that are difficult to classify. After an initial classification into three categories (those funded, those in the grey area and those not selected), projects classified in the "grey area" are selected randomly. This streamlines the procedures.
- Consideration of numerous **qualitative criteria** during project evaluations:
  - Integrating the **general context**:
    - Other applications received.
    - The research topic (in terms of publication customs).
  - **Already fairly reasoned use of quantitative metrics**:
    - If used: placed in the **general context** of the applicants' CVs (collaboration, reputation, activity, etc.) and taking into account the **entire career path** (including atypical career paths) of the candidates evaluated (in addition to metrics such as grades, rankings, etc.).
- Positive criteria present in the evaluations of some research projects:
  - **Summary** of recent and significant **publications** generally requested in addition to bibliometric indices + information on publication strategy (open question).
  - Request for a **narrative CV** for specific calls for projects.
  - **Overall interest** of the research topics for the field, societal impact and fundamental issues.
  - **Interdisciplinarity** taken into account.

- Evaluation of the **working environment**.
- **Sustainability** aspect of the project (incorporating the challenges raised by sustainability issues).
- **Young academics/young research teams** supported in appropriate calls.
- **Services to the institution** considered.
- **EDI** aspects of the research project.
- **Gender** balance in the proposed consortia.
- **Recommendation letters** play an important role in the evaluation.

Areas for improvement

- **Transparency of the criteria considered** during project evaluations (there are still many disparities between calls for proposals in terms of both communication and dissemination of these criteria).
- There is often no official guide for evaluators to make them aware of:
  - The **biases linked to quantitative metrics**.
  - How to define a **conflict of interest** and what action to take in such a situation.
- Explicit request for **quantitative metrics** in certain application files.
- **Criteria that are rarely or not present**:
  - Rewarding the investment in **Open Science**.
  - Rewarding the investment in **peer-reviewing**.
  - In the CRAs, no information requested on the promoters' involvement in missions other than research (**no criteria for missions relating to services to society, teaching**).

B) For academic recruitment

Good practices

- **Transparency and visibility of procedures**:
  - Clarity of procedures: **agenda** and composition of the **application file** clearly detailed and **available** on the universities' public websites.
  - **Standardisation of job vacancies**, often with a **single template** via the same web interface.
  - **Job publications relayed** via Academic Position, Euraxess and specialised channels (HRS4R - OTMR label).
- **Feedback**: Unsuccessful candidates generally have the right to discuss the decision (on request) with, for example, the Vice-Rector for Personnel Policy. Feedback on the decision, but no 'real' rebuttal, since the decision regarding the selected candidates has already been taken.
- **External experts** are often invited to sit on assessment committees alongside members of the institution. Similarly, in some institutions, **substitutes** as backups are provided in case replacements are needed (unavailability or conflict of interest).
- **New positions,** known as **profiled jobs,** are often created based on a specific research or teaching need. However sometimes **unprofiled jobs** may also be opened.
- **Guidelines**:
  - Sometimes there is a **vade-mecum** guide for recruitment committee members, giving a full description of their role.
  - Sometimes there is an **indicative grid** to help detect potential **conflicts of interest**, which is distributed to recruitment committee members.

- **Positive criteria** in applications:
  - **Summary** of a few recent and significant publications (in addition to the full list of publications).
  - **Recommendation letters**.
  - The **three missions** are generally evaluated (research, teaching and institutional services, with a scale of importance generally going from the first to the third mission).
  - An **interview** with the evaluation committee is almost systematically organised.

Areas for improvement

- **Transparency of the criteria used**: Each committee must agree on the selection criteria prior to the evaluation, whether or not they are based on a communicated list. The criteria should be systematically published in the call for tenders.
- **Administrative burden**: Recruitment committees are unique for each vacant position.
- **Criteria that are rarely or not present**:
  - Supervisory/mentoring skills.
  - Leadership ability, team management.
  - Rewarding the investment in peer-reviewing.
  - Rewarding the investment in Open Science.

C) For academic confirmation/promotion

Good practices

- **Transparency of procedures**:
  - Clear procedures: **complete agenda available** on the institutions' internal websites.
  - A single **application form** for promotion (for all career levels) to enable a standardised comparison.
- **Feedback/appeals**:
  - **Appeals**: there is often the possibility to appeal (if the applicant notices administrative errors).
  - In some institutions, a **personalised report** is sent to candidates (promoted or not) with points of attention, recommendations and suggested areas for improvement.
- Sometimes institutions offer a **tool to monitor academic careers** (a guide or document):
  - Focuses on the three missions assigned to academics: research, teaching and services.
  - Flexible and adaptable.
  - Aims to guide the development of the academic career, not to control it.
- Some institutions appoint a senior academic "**coach**" to advise the newcomer during the probationary period.
- For some promotions, an **oral interview** may be organised between candidates and the promotion committee (not always the case).
- The committees often try NOT to reinforce **gender** inequalities between those promoted, but rather to achieve a gender balance.
- All **promotions awarded** are generally made **public** (sometimes even the composition of the committees).
- **Positive criteria** in applications:
  - **Summary** of several recent and significant **publications** (in addition to the list of publications in DIAL.PR format).
  - **Valorisation of research** taken into account (patents, spin-offs, etc.).
  - Significant participation in conferences.

- o **Mentoring/supervision** aspect (dissertations, theses, etc.).
- o Reward for investment in **peer-reviewing** (via editorial functions in scientific journals).
- o **Leadership** aspect (number of theses promoted, responsibility for managing teaching and research entities).

Areas for improvement

- **Transparency of criteria used**: The criteria really used by promotion committees do not seem to be systematically communicated to candidates.
- Promotion to the grade of "Ordinary Professor" is based on a competitive examination because a quota is imposed by law (the number of ordinary and extraordinary professors may not exceed, in FTE (full-time equivalent) terms, "20% of teaching and scientific staff posts" (Art. 40 §2 of the law of 27 July 1971). This very limited number of possibilities means that promotion to this grade is, de facto, the result of a competition).
- **Quantitative criteria**:
  - o Bibliometric criteria generally explicitly requested (H-WOS, H-G.Scholar, other available rankings).
- **Criteria that are rarely or not present**:
  - o Rewarding for investment in Open Science.

2. Development proposals

Based on the findings of the inventory of the criteria currently used to evaluate research in the five FWB universities, our working group has identified priority areas for improvement. These development proposals form a non-exhaustive list of changes that could be proposed to the FWB institutions.

A) For research projects

→ "Minimum compromise feedback" proposal (but universities can do more if they wish):

- • If external feedback: send it anonymously.
- • If internal feedback: oral feedback from the VRR, on request (written feedback is too time-consuming) and for all calls requiring a minimum budget (e.g. as soon as staff are hired for more than one year).

→ Proposal to create an applicator's guide: With attention given to conflicts of interest (particularly useful when recommending advice from external persons) → idea of using the FRS-FNRS guide as a basis.

→ Proposal to create an evaluator's guide: This guide could contain certain themes such as telling external assessors that their reports will be sent anonymously to applicants and committee members, containing guidelines to be respected in the case of conflicts of interest or reminders of the limitations of quantitative metrics, etc.

→ Proposal to leave room for open questions in application forms to:

- • Describe the applicant's investment strategy regarding Open Science (OA, RDM, etc.) and peer-reviewing.
- • Consider researchers who have devoted time to something other than research (e.g. service to the institution, as dean, etc.).
- • Add a "relevant comments" field for applicants in the application forms (this would make it possible to justify certain atypical career paths).

B) <u>For recruitment and promotions</u>

→ Proposal to <u>diversify the criteria</u>:

- Supervision ability: not necessarily relevant when hiring young people who have not yet had the opportunity to supervise others.
- Leadership/team management skills.
- Ask the candidate what his or her strategy is regarding investment in approaches such as Open Science or peer-reviewing.

→ Proposal to create a <u>scale of assessment criteria</u>: "central criteria" VS "complementary criteria". For example, involvement in Open Science would come as a complementary criterion for equivalent qualities of central criteria.

→ Propose to <u>encourage</u> committees to <u>share with applicants the criteria</u> chosen for their evaluation as soon as the vacant position is published.

→ Propose an <u>annual update of the criteria</u> taken into account in recruitment and promotion assessment committees. Introduce annual feedback from the members of these committees to the authorities.

→ Proposal to <u>reformulate certain criteria to make them less metric</u>. For example, the number of grants obtained by a researcher should be reworded to read "What was your fund-raising policy?", as the strategy can vary greatly from one discipline to another, and asking an open-ended question would therefore be more in line with the needs of the discipline concerned. This criterion is also linked to the researcher's autonomy and leadership.