



Chemical Sciences
Earth and Life Sciences
Physical Sciences
ZonMw

TOP Grants

First subsidy round cross-divisional applications (2009-2010)

The Hague, 8 December 2009

Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

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1 Introduction

This brochure contains information about the submission of an application for a TOP grant in the joint, cross-disciplinary TOP Grants programme run by the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw) and the NWO Divisions for the Earth and Life Sciences (ALW), Chemical Sciences (CW) and Physical Sciences (EW). In 2009/2010 these organisations are, for the first time, running a joint subsidy programme for curiosity-driven research in open competition. The budget available for this Call is approximately 14 million euro.

TOP grants have an upper limit of 750,000 euro and are intended for (combinations of) research groups with excellent past performance who propose a groundbreaking, top-quality research programme. With this new instrument, ZonMw and the NWO divisions involved expect to be able to meet an existing need. By assessing proposals on a cross-disciplinary (in Dutch *gebiedsoverschrijdend*, hence GO) basis rather than a single-discipline basis, the organisations taking this initiative aim to offer more opportunities to researchers working at the interface between disciplines. They hope that the number of interdisciplinary proposals will increase as a result.

The available budget of 14 million euro was created with investment from the participating divisions and a substantial contribution from NWO's Governing Board. For the time being, the joint TOP Grants subsidy round is a one-off event and is being organised as a pilot alongside the existing TOP Grants subsidy rounds of the participating organisations. Based on the results, the organisations involved will decide whether to continue this collaboration.

2 Aim

TOP Grants offer top researchers the opportunity to renew their group's lines of research as far as content and collaboration are concerned. The intention is to create scope for groundbreaking, top-quality science. TOP Grants research has a, preferably wide-ranging, impact on science itself or on society. An excellent track record and excellent scientific results obtained by the applicants in the past form important criteria in the assessment of the TOP proposals.

TOP researchers from a broad range of scientific disciplines can participate. This cross-disciplinary TOP Grants subsidy round, which is a one-off event for the time being, is a collaboration between the NWO Divisions for the Earth and Life Sciences, Chemical Sciences and Physical Sciences and the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw). With this initiative, the four parties aim to explore the added value of competition across the whole spectrum of science and the potential role of cross-disciplinary initiatives in such a structure.

3 Guidelines for applicants

3.1 Who can apply

All criteria below apply to the main applicants as well as all co-applicants.

- Professors, university lecturers or senior lecturers, or researchers holding an equivalent position can submit if they:
 - are employed at a Dutch university or a research institute recognised by NWO or ZonMw, and
 - hold at least a master's degree in science or engineering or an equivalent qualification, and
 - have an employment contract for at least the duration of the application procedure and the duration of the research for which the grant is requested. For co-applicants, an exception can be made if the applicants can prove that adequate supervision of all researchers for whom funding is sought can be guaranteed for the full duration of the research.
- There can only be one TOP GO proposal per research group in this subsidy round; a research group is defined as researchers who usually publish together. If one member of a group is considering submitting an application, he or she should inform the other members of the research group. A researcher cannot be involved in more than one application.
- The application should come within the area of at least one of the following NWO divisions: Earth and Life Sciences, Chemical Sciences, Physical Sciences¹ and the organisation ZonMw. Researchers wishing to submit an application at the interfaces between these disciplines are particularly encouraged to do so.

3.2 What can be applied for

The maximum budget for a TOP Grant is € 750,000. Smaller amounts can also be applied for.

Subsidies can be requested to cover all reasonable, non-infrastructure costs necessary for the research, such as the appointment of temporary personnel, materials (instruments, consumables), fieldwork and travel costs. Funding cannot be requested for permanent staff, student assistants, 'overhead' costs, general laboratory equipment, maintenance and insurance costs, conference attendance or publication costs. The starting point for the final determination of the grant is that the guidelines for the auditing of NWO projects laid down in the control protocol agreed by the universities with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) are complied with.

Personnel costs are subsidised in accordance with the most recent 'Agreement on meeting the costs of scientific research' signed by NWO, VSNU, NFU, ZonMw, KNAW and VFI. The agreement and the maximum amounts for personnel costs can be found via the website: www.nwo.nl/top/go_uk.

¹ Physical Sciences include Astronomy, Computer Sciences and Mathematics

3.3 When can applications be submitted

The deadline for the submission of proposals is **15 February 2010** (23:59 hours). Proposals should be received no later than this deadline. After this deadline, no alterations or additions can be made to the proposal.

3.4 Drawing up an application

An application consists of two parts: a fact sheet and the research proposal. The fact sheet can be filled in electronically via Iris, the NWO's electronic grant application system. The research proposal should be submitted using the application form which can be downloaded from the website: www.nwo.nl/top/go_uk. A copy of the form in PDF format should be appended to the electronic submission via Iris.

Both the fact sheet and the research proposal should be completed in English. Use a minimum font size of 10 points and note the limit on the number of words/pages. If the application form is not completed in full or the maximum number of words/pages per question is exceeded, your application may be rejected as inadmissible.

3.4.1 Fact sheet

The fact sheet should state the name and address of the main applicant, the names of any co-applicants, the title of the research and a summary in English (not exceeding 250 words). If the application is successful, this summary in English will be publicly available via the NWO website, unless you withhold consent for this when the grant application is submitted.

3.4.2 Application form

The research proposal can be downloaded from the website: www.nw.nl/top/go_uk. Notes for the completion of the application form are also available on the website.

3.5 Specific conditions

The Steering Group (see 4.3) reserves the right to require an application to be shortened or amended on scientific, policy or budgetary grounds as a condition of a possible award. If an application is granted, the Steering Group generally designates the main applicant as project leader. The latter receives the instructions for project and programme leaders and the NWO general subsidy regulations.

The specific conditions applicable to the award of a TOP Grant will become available via the website: www.nwo.nl/top/go_uk. The General Terms and Conditions of NWO Grants (most recent version) are applicable provided they do not depart from these specific conditions and the conditions in this Call.

ZonMw, ALW and CW each have separate, area-specific rules for TOP Grants with accompanying guidelines and specific conditions. The guidelines and specific conditions in question are not applicable to this joint TOP Grants scheme. More information about the area-specific rules can be found on the following websites: www.zonmw.nl/top, www.nwo.nl/alw/top and www.nwo.nl/cw/top.

3.6 Submitting an application

Applications can be submitted only through the electronic application system Iris. To do this you must request an access code via the NWO website: www.iris.nwo.nl. This website also has more information about Iris. The Iris helpdesk answers questions of a technical nature.

An application consists of two parts: a fact sheet containing the key details of both the applicant(s) and the application, and the research proposal. When the fact sheet is completed electronically, the research proposal should also be appended in PDF format. The sending of additional documents (e.g. letters of recommendation, reprints) is not permitted.

Applicants have the opportunity of suggesting referees for the assessment of the application via Iris.

Applicants can rule out certain researchers (up to three) as referees for the proposal if they send a request to that end by e-mail (top@nwo.nl). The deadline of 15 February 2010 also applies in this respect.

In accordance with the 'Agreement on meeting the costs of scientific research', the institution where the applicant is employed must agree to the submission. NWO assumes that the applicant has informed his or her institution and that it agrees to provide all the infrastructure required for the research, including the associated costs not included in the application. NWO also assumes that the institution will guarantee the supervision of the research for which funding is requested. If the application is awarded, NWO will request that you submit written confirmation of this.

4 Assessment procedure

4.1 Procedure

Submitting proposals

Grant applications should be drawn up in English and submitted via Iris, NWO's electronic submission system. Applicants should follow the guidelines in this respect, see Section 3.6. Applicants should indicate whether their application is predominantly a life sciences or a physical sciences application.

No preliminary proposals

Preliminary proposals are not part of the assessment procedure. If the number of applications submitted is more than four times the number of projects expected to be granted, there is a possibility of conducting a preselection process shortly after the deadline for submissions. In this procedure the least promising proposals will be excluded from the main procedure on the basis of an assessment made by the evaluation committee. Applicants will be given the opportunity to respond to the evaluation committee's recommendation before the Steering Group decides which proposals to exclude. This process will not involve the use of referees. A preselection process will keep the administrative load on the peer review system within acceptable limits.

Eligibility

The programme office checks the eligibility of the proposal, i.e. whether the proposal meets the administrative and technical criteria imposed, see Sections 3.1-3.6. Only applications which meet all the conditions are eligible and are taken into consideration. If an application does not meet all the criteria, the programme office will contact the applicant. Major and irreparable defects will lead to the application not being taken into consideration.

Suitability

Eligible research proposals are assessed by an evaluation committee. Before assessing the content of the proposal, the evaluation committee assesses whether the proposed research comes within the area of at least one of the NWO Divisions Earth and Life Sciences, Chemical Sciences or Physical Sciences², or of ZonMw.

The evaluation committee reserves the right to recommend that the Steering Group reject applications at this stage if they do not meet the above general conditions. If the applicant has doubts before submission as to whether his or her application meets the conditions, he or she is advised to contact the programme secretariat.

Assessment, ranking and final decision

In assessing the applications, the evaluation committee makes use of recommendations obtained from independent experts ('referees'), mainly from other countries. The referees assess the application against the four criteria stated in Section 4.2. At least two, but preferably four referees' reports are obtained for each application. The applicant is given the opportunity to suggest suitable referees. The members of the evaluation committee (and possibly other parties) may also suggest referees. Other people are always brought in as referees in addition to the applicant's suggestions. The final responsibility for approaching referees lies with the

² Physical Sciences includes Astronomy, Computer Sciences and Mathematics

programme office. The reports are rendered anonymous and sent to the applicant for the purposes of a written rebuttal.

In an assessment meeting, the evaluation committee discusses each application submitted. The rebuttal, referees' reports and application form the basis for the committee's final opinion. Although the committee members will be obliged to act as 'generalists' with respect to virtually all applications, the committee as a whole is also expected to include an assessment of the content and quality of the referees' reports in its considerations. The committee responds to the application with a reasoned assessment supported by figures. It then determines a ranking.

Each assessment criterion is assessed separately by the referees. The committee uses the referees' arguments and the applicant's rebuttal to arrive at an independent opinion on the application. The committee's role differs in this respect from that of the referees, because:

- the committee takes account of the applicant's rebuttal, while the referee does not see it so cannot take it into account;
- the committee can take all applications, reports and rebuttals into account, while the referees, as a rule, never sees more than one application and the referees do not coordinate their opinion between themselves.

This means that the committee may arrive at a different assessment to the referees.

The evaluation committee then advises the Steering Group on the quality of the research proposals submitted to it. On the basis of that advice and on the basis of the available funding the Steering Group issues a decision to grant or reject the application. Where necessary, policy considerations are taken into account. They will be made public beforehand.

Schedule

The following schedule is an approximation. Applicants can follow the assessment procedure at their Iris account.

1 October 2009	preliminary notice
8 December	call, application forms & guidelines available
15 February 2010	deadline for submitting applications (23:59 hours)
15 February – 1 March	eligibility check
1 March – 15 May	obtaining opinions from referees
15 May – 1 June	written rebuttal
late June	evaluation committee meeting
mid-July	decision
late July	announcement of decision

N.B. the schedule will be adjusted should a preselection procedure be necessary; in this case, it should be anticipated that the assessment procedure will be extended by a good 6-8 weeks.

4.2 Criteria

The assessment takes place on the basis of the following four criteria:

- I. Aim and impact (on science or society)
- II. Scientific approach and methods
- III. Innovative, groundbreaking and challenging
- IV. Past performance

If assessment against these four criteria results in proposals ending *ex aequo*, proposals of a cross-disciplinary nature will be given priority in the ranking.

I. Aim and impact (on science or society)

- Does the proposal address an important scientific and/or social problem?
- Are the problem and the project's objectives clearly worded? When the project's aims are achieved, what impact might that have on the problem?
- To what extent can deepening of scientific knowledge be expected as an outcome? Is there a likelihood of knock-on effects on other scientific areas? How does the project relate to research being carried out internationally in this field? Are the theoretical foundations of the project decisions (hypotheses) adequate?
- Are the expected results also of potential social relevance (possibly on a timescale longer than that of the project)? If this is the case, will the project have been sufficiently prepared for that (contacts with relevant social parties, expertise in the project group)?

II. Scientific approach and methods

- Are the study design, methods and analyses clearly presented and appropriate to the aim of the project?
- Are the applicants presenting (own) results which substantiate the correctness of the approach?
- If the approach is broken down into sub-projects, are they coherent and consistent with the aim of the project as a whole?
- Do the applicants identify any potential problems in the approach and do they present alternatives?
- Is the research team suitably composed in terms of expertise and experience, and does it have adequate management? Will appropriate arrangements be made for the supervision of the proposed researchers? Are the budget items requested in proportion to the aim?

III. Innovative, groundbreaking, challenging

- In what way are the project objectives original, challenging and scientifically groundbreaking?
- Is the project based on new concepts; does it use a new approach or methods? Does the project tackle existing paradigms? Are new methodologies or technologies being developed?

IV. Past performance

- What is the scientific position of the (members of the) group (importance of current lines of research; international status; local embedding; etc.)?
- What is the scientific past performance of the (members of the) group (publications; doctoral theses; record of attracting grants; etc.)?

4.3 Composition of Steering Group and evaluation committee

The boards of ZonMw and the NWO divisions ALW, CW and EW appoint a Steering Group which is mandated with decision-making in this TOP GO subsidy round. The Steering Group appoints the evaluation committee, taking account of independence, spread of expertise and distribution between institutions. The evaluation committee has two sections: one for applications of a life sciences nature and one for applications of a physical sciences nature. The sections rank the applications entrusted to them, and then combine these at a joint meeting to form a single recommendation.

The composition of the committee is made public after the end of the assessment procedure. Communication with the committee is always via the programme office; direct contact with individual committee members is not permitted.

5 Further information

5.1 Contact

This call is available via the TOP website (www.nwo.nl/top/go_uk), where the application form and explanatory notes can also be downloaded. For more information, please contact:

- Dr I.S. (Ivo) Ridder, tel. +31 70 344 0683, e-mail i.ridder@nwo.nl

5.2 Dutch version

A Dutch version of this call is available on the TOP website, where the application forms can be downloaded as well (www.nwo.nl/top/go). The original Dutch Call is the authoritative version. Where the English translation is open to a different interpretation, no additional rights may be derived from it.

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