Talent without borders
An evaluation of the Rubicon programme
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Executive summary

The Rubicon programme enables excellent and very good fledgling Dutch and foreign researchers to gain research experience abroad or in the Netherlands. NWO has asked ITS to evaluate Rubicon. In the evaluation we distinguish various parties: Rubicon applicants (rejected applicants and laureates), supervisors of the applicants in the Netherlands and abroad, supervisors of the laureates (at the host institutes) in the Netherlands and abroad and (as a control group) scientists who have never submitted an application for Rubicon. These parties were all posed questions by means of questionnaires. In addition to this, telephone interviews were held with members of the selection committees, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the project office and board of NWO.

The following principle and subsidiary questions formed the basis for the evaluation:

**Principal question 1: To what extent does Rubicon work in an efficient and effective manner?**
- Are the procedures for Rubicon efficient and transparent?
- Do NWO and the selection committees carry out the activities in an effective/efficient manner?
- Have excellent and very good researchers taken the opportunity to fund a stay abroad or in the Netherlands via Rubicon?
- How do various parties ‘in the field’ view Rubicon?
- How attractive is Rubicon compared to other similar programmes?

**Principal question 2: What are the effects of the Rubicon programme?**
- For Dutch researchers, does Rubicon facilitate further progression of the scientific career in the Netherlands and, in particular, does Rubicon facilitate the application for and possibly the awarding of a Veni grant?
- Does Rubicon facilitate the quality of Dutch science as a result of foreign researchers continuing their scientific career in the Netherlands after a Rubicon grant?
- Which indication can be given for the scientific results of participation in the Rubicon programme?
- Does Rubicon function as a bridge between gaining a doctorate and the application for/awarding of a Veni?

Chapter 6 of this report shall discuss these questions in greater detail. In this summary we shall now discuss the most important conclusions.

**Conclusions principal question 1: efficiency and effectiveness of Rubicon**

In general, the applicants are very satisfied with the manner in which the application procedure for Rubicon is set up. The selection procedure yields quick results and that is highly appreciated by the applicants. Rubicon has a specific target group of researchers who are frequently in the transition phase between doctoral research and a postdoc position. Consequently, they need to know the outcome of their application as soon as possible. The only point of criticism from both rejected applicants and laureates is a lack of information when the result is announced. The special character of the target group plays a role in this. These starting researchers have a considerable need for feedback concerning the positive aspects and points for improvement of their research proposal. A second focus area for NWO is the relatively large proportion of telephone queries that are not satisfactorily dealt with (40%). The selection committees exhibit a high degree of consensus with respect to the evaluation of the very good to excellent applicants, even if the subject knowledge about
the applicant’s discipline is lacking. Therefore they do not miss the subject-specific comments of external referees. The standard set by NWO is that the three evaluation aspects (the quality of the applicant, the quality of the application and the quality of the host institute) carry equal weighting during the selection process. However, all six members of the selection committees interviewed by us stated using the unwritten rule that the quality of the host institute plays a lesser role. This is because they find it difficult to properly assess the quality of the host institute, as this partly depends on the position that the applicant shall assume within the host institute.

All of the parties interviewed are satisfied about the manner in which the project office carries out its tasks. At present, the project office devotes a lot of attention to clarifying the employment status of laureates abroad (also from a tax viewpoint) and the consequences of this for various welfare benefits. Efforts are also being made to improve the communication possibilities with applicants, for example via an Internet forum.

Generally speaking, there is a great demand for possibilities to gain research experience abroad. Many rejected applicants actively look for other possibilities and many scientists who did not submit a Rubicon application have spent a period doing research abroad. This means that there is a clear demand for a programme like Rubicon within the scientific community. The laureates mostly carry out research that touches upon the core of the research programme in the host institute and is (relatively) innovative. The added value of Rubicon compared to similar European programmes is that it specifically targets the Dutch market, as a result of which Dutch researchers have a higher chance of being awarded a grant. In addition to this, the conditions attached to Rubicon are less stringent than those for other grant instruments, for example with respect to possible research subjects and applications for countries outside of Europe. Less positive aspects are the size of the grant payment and the short research period. Other popular grant instruments are Marie Curie, EMBO, Niels Stensen and Von Humboldt fellowship.

**Conclusions principal question two: effects of Rubicon**

Of the Dutch laureates who go abroad, slightly less than half return immediately after the Rubicon period to a scientific position in the Netherlands. It would appear that many excellent Dutch researchers only return to the Netherlands if they can gain a different (higher) position than a postdoc, or if they can obtain a tenured position. Of the foreign laureates in the Netherlands, only a quarter remain in a scientific position in the Netherlands. The supervisors of the foreign researchers in the Netherlands also indicate that it is difficult to retain this group.

According to the respondents, the importance of a foreign research period for the scientific career lies mainly in increasing the international network and the chance of working at renowned research institutes. In addition to this, expansion of the scientific perspective and letting go of fixed ways of thinking were also mentioned. The remarks of applicants, non-applicants and the selection committee clearly revealed, moreover, that institutional diversity is more important than cultural diversity. It is vital that a researcher gains experience at excellent institutes but that does not necessarily have to be abroad. Yet for the Netherlands, it is true that top institutes are frequently located in other countries. In a nutshell, foreign experience is first and foremost important because it means that as a scientist you can work, publish and network at a top institute and only secondly because you gain experience working abroad. Laureates and non-applicants with foreign research experience indicate that this experience served as an important stimulus for their career.
Relatively speaking, laureates submit a Veni application more frequently than rejected Rubicon applicants. Furthermore, laureates have a greater chance of being allocated a Veni grant than rejected Rubicon applicants and researchers who have not submitted a Rubicon application.

These conclusions lead to the following four recommendations:

**Recommendation institutional experience versus foreign experience**

The selection committee members state that it is particularly important that fledgling researchers are given the opportunity to publish at a top level at a top institute. They believe in the proposition: a good position at a Dutch top institute with a high chance of good publications is better than a marginal position at a top institute abroad with few publication possibilities. This opinion is also evident from the questionnaires. However, as for the Netherlands the majority of top institutes are in other countries, it is certainly vital that Dutch fledgling scientists can go abroad to gain this experience at these top institutes. In the application and selection procedure, it would be a good idea if NWO were to try to place greater emphasis on the host institute and the position that the applicant will assume there.

**Explanation of the reasons for rejection or award**

The target group of Rubicon consists of fledgling researchers who are trying to independently acquire funds for their research, often for the first time. They therefore have a considerable need for feedback about the strong and weak aspects of their research proposals. As the average Rubicon applicant will probably submit a grant application to NWO more often during the course of their scientific career, it could be worthwhile for NWO to respond to the request from this group of applicants for more and better feedback.

**Period foreign researchers in the Netherlands**

It is advisable to extend the period that foreign researchers can stay in the Netherlands to two years. This would give the foreign researchers more opportunities to build up a relationship with the Netherlands. Furthermore, non-applicants and supervisors have remarked that the period of one year is far too short to justify the difficulty in arranging a research period in the Netherlands. An extension of the period would make Rubicon more attractive, and with this possibly more ‘competitive’, with respect to other European grant instruments for excellent foreign researchers.

**Consequences of the placement abroad**

To prevent laureates being taken by surprise, it would be worthwhile providing information on the NWO website in advance about the consequences of a placement abroad for issues such as pregnancy, health insurance and other social benefits such as unemployment benefit. Information about the tax position is also important. The employment position and the consequences for the social benefits of the laureates currently has the full attention of the programme office. Such an overview with an explanation would tie in well with this.