

# Belgian university introduces universal basic research funding

Over 1,000 professors will get €30,000 a year to spend as they please as a remedy to the low success rates of national and international competitions

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A Belgian university is to offer a flat research grant to all its academics from next year, in what its rector said was a response to low success rates for competitive alternatives.

Once [Ghent University](#)'s scheme is fully up and running by 2027, full- and part-time researchers will be able to get at least €30,000 (£25,700) annually – enough that two could club together and fund a doctoral grant, the university said.

To get the grant, staff members must have applied for external research funding, had an academic publication and supervised a doctorate in the past three years. The university estimated around 1,100 staff were eligible.

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Ghent said the move was part of a shift towards broader, qualitative evaluation of academic work.

“Competition is good as long as it’s within reasonable limits,” Ghent’s rector, Rik Van de Walle, told *Times Higher Education*. “Competition becomes bad when it leads to a situation where some people never get something although they have capacity to be productive. Then competition kills productivity.”

Professor Van de Walle said that calls for European Union, Belgian and local research funding were all “extremely competitive”. Both the main Flemish funding calls and the university’s own competition had success rates of between 20 per cent and 25 per cent, he said. “A lot of [our professors] never get anything from our own research funding schemes, which is weird,” he added.

He argued that a publish-or-perish culture encouraged researchers to be risk-averse and that “it was up to universities to create a playground” where scholars could focus on their work without the constant pressure of applying for funding.

Significantly, the flat funding does not discriminate between disciplines and, while Professor Van de Walle said there had been extensive discussion on adjusting for the “huge differences” in costs and materials between fields, it was decided that major infrastructure costs would have to be met with outside help or cooperation anyway, and that the price of a PhD grant was the same across subjects.

The basic grants will bring the share of non-competitive funding awarded by the university to about 14 per cent, up from about 5 per cent at present. The scheme will replace several competitive calls, but at least €7 million a year will still be awarded competitively.

There is growing support for the idea of a [universal basic research income](#). In 2017, researchers at [Eindhoven University of Technology](#) calculated that shares of just over \$500,000 (£380,000) every five years would be available for each researcher in the Netherlands if all competitive grants were switched to flat payments.

When asked, Professor Van de Walle agreed there was a “risk” that productivity could dip because of the change, but he said that publication rates had not been hurt since Ghent switched to qualitative research assessment.

“I really don’t believe that we have a substantial number of professors whose aim it is to receive money for doing nothing. I don’t know these professors; I never saw them,” he said.

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