

Abstract

Sectorial scientific research performed by Flemish higher education institutions

The Court of Audit examined the participation of Flemish higher education institutions to sectorial projects of scientific research. It has also checked how the Flemish government departments organize such calls for projects. It found the policy of higher education institutions still aims insufficiently at the provision of services, especially in the field of sectorial scientific research performed for the government. Nonetheless, provision of services, together with teaching and research, belongs to their mission assigned by decree. The members of staff or research groups can decide for themselves whether they respond to a call for proposals. Besides, rules governing plurality of offices do not prevent staff from exercising additional functions on their own account. More often than not, the Flemish departments still issue calls for research projects on an ad-hoc basis and do not always apply tender rules correctly. The Court of Audit therefore recommends the higher education institutions should develop an active policy for service provision. As for the authorities, they should determine research needs in a more structured way.

Introduction

The Flemish government's sectorial scientific research encompasses research initiatives aimed at enhancing knowledge in the specific policy fields. The rules governing the scientific and social provision of services by higher education institutions are stipulated in the service provision decree. All Flemish universities and a sample of seven higher education institutions were included in the Court's audit.

Implementation of the decree on service provision

All universities and examined higher institutions have approved a service provision regulation. According to this regulation, service provision contracts must be signed by the vice-chancellor or the general manager. In the universities members of staff often commit their institution without prior approval from their management by submitting a tender. (Ex post) control of these commitments is not quite conclusive. The audit showed that members of staff perform on their own account activities that are in line with the scientific expertise of their institution. Basing themselves on the rules governing plurality of offices the institutions define their staff's additional functions only in terms of their availability for the institution and not on the basis of the nature of the activities. Few institutions make use of the possibility to award personal bonuses as a way to stimulate provision of services on an internal level.

Service provision strategy and policy

In 2003 the Flemish government concluded just over 30% of all contracts for sectorial scientific research with universities and higher education institutions. The Court of Audit performed a spot check of the institutions' response to the government's calls for research projects. The response rate was just under 25%. The universities mainly put forward financial and organizational factors to explain their relatively low response. Besides, the usefulness of this type of research for the staff's academic career is limited. As for the higher institu-

tions, only half of the sample had a special service for research coordination. The absence of such a recognizable external service makes these institutions less easy to contact. On the other hand, all universities have created their own specialized service. In spite of this, the decision to respond to the call for proposals is taken by the member of staff or the research group. As far as the calls for research projects are concerned, the research coordination services have only an intermediary function.

Assessment of the research needs

When putting out sectorial research projects for tender, about one third of all government departments call upon the so-called university support points. Besides, research needs are mainly defined by the departments' private offices. Most departments have neither formal instructions nor informal agreements regarding additional research contracts: as a result, these types of contracts mostly come into being on an ad-hoc basis.

Bidding process for research contracts

Most departments make no distinction between research contracts and other procurement contracts. However, this distinction is of great significance when it comes to applying public procurement regulations. With only a few exceptions, the departments do not refer to the legal provisions under which research contracts may be awarded by negotiated procedure or without applying the law on public procurement. Moreover, they generally do not mention the procurement mode. Typical of the contracts awarded by means of negotiated procedure is a deficient investigation of the market. The departments impose stricter regulations for justifications of expenses on universities than on private companies. Furthermore, the institutions are sometimes disadvantaged at this level because they employ highly qualified personnel.