Veni – research grant for young talent in the Netherlands

EMYA column regularly presented by Vesna Iršič

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Amongst the many different lines of research funding that the Dutch Research Council (NWO) offers, the Talent Programme, consisting of the Veni, Vidi and Vici grants, is one of the most prestigious and potentially most impactful for a researcher's career. These personal grants each target researchers at different stages in their academic career, allowing successful applicants to initiate, develop and establish their own innovative line of research and build or expand their laboratory or research group. In this article, we will introduce you further to the Veni grant, which is aimed at early-career researchers who have recently obtained their PhD. We will discuss whom it is for, what it encompasses, and how the application and assessment procedure works. Additionally, two recent Veni laureates in mathematics, Dr. Havva Yoldaş[1] and Dr. Pol van Hoften,[2] share their experiences, tips and tricks for a successful Veni application.

For whom and what for?

The Veni grant is aimed at early-career academics who have shown exceptional academic qualities in their work and offers them the chance to develop themselves as fully independent researchers. The grant is meant for researchers who obtained their PhD no longer than three years prior to the submission deadline and provides successful applicants with the opportunity to spend three years developing their own, independent line of research.

Researchers with and without (permanent) contracts, from within and outside of the Netherlands are encouraged to apply, provided that they have an embedding guarantee from a Dutch university or research institute, i.e., they are guaranteed a place to conduct their project at an institute in the Netherlands if their application is successful.

Applicants apply for a research project that lasts for a maximum of three years in case of full-time research. It is possible to apply for a shorter project, as well as to apply for an extension of at most one year in case of part-time research. The grant primarily covers the salary of the successful applicant, with a little room in the budget as well as for the salary of non-academic staff and materials necessary for the project. It is not allowed to hire academic staff, i.e., a PhD candidate or postdoc, on the budget. The maximum amount that could be applied for in the 2024 round is 320,000 euro, but this maximum may change year to year.

Havva Yoldaş received a Veni grant in 2023. Her project is entitled "Mathematical analysis of metastability in complex biological systems" and started in February 2024. She is currently a tenured assistant professor and a Delft Technology Fellow at the Delft Institute of Applied Mathematics, Delft University of Technology (TU Delft). Her research looks at the metastable behaviour of mathematical models of biological systems. Havva had already successfully applied for an assistant professor position at the TU Delft when she learnt about the Veni grant and decided to apply immediately as it was her last year of eligibility. She feels that taking the time after her PhD to fully develop her research idea was useful, and she would recommend not rushing into applying for this type of grant.

Pol van Hoften received the Veni grant in 2024 for his project "New cases of zeta functions of Shimura varieties." He is currently an assistant professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) and is interested in the Langlands programme, in particular in the mod p and p-adic geometry of Shimura varieties. Pol applied after just having moved back to the Netherlands to start a position at the VU Amsterdam. He was still eligible to apply for the Veni, and since grant writing is an important part of being an academic, he started right away with the application process.

Veni (assessment) procedure

An application within the NWO Talent Programme can be submitted within one of the following four domains: Science, Applied and Engineering Sciences (AES), Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) and Health Research and Development (in Dutch: ZonMW). NWO advises you to consider well in advance which domain

[1] https://www.tudelft.nl/ewi/over-de-faculteit/afdelingen/applied-mathematics/people/dr-h-havva-yoldas

[2] https://polvanhoften2.github.io

is most suitable for your application, as procedures may vary slightly between domains. Most mathematics proposals are submitted to the domain Science. However, if you are in doubt about which domain to apply through, please get in touch with one of the contact persons of the programme as early as possible. They will be able to advise you which domain may best fit your application, but the final choice of the domain is, of course, yours.

Starting in the 2023 round, there is a two-stage assessment throughout the entire Talent Programme. The first phase, the pre-proposal phase, is based primarily on the evaluation of the so-called evidence-based CV, while the second stage focuses on the research proposal.

Pre-proposal phase

Applicants must submit a pre-proposal to be considered for a Veni grant. The pre-proposal includes a narrative description of the applicant's academic profile, up to ten key output items and a short research idea. In the academic profile, applicants can highlight aspects of their career that they consider important, like prior achievements in their scientific work, impact their work has had on their research field or on society, or their research vision, to name just a few options. Applicants are free to shape the narrative in any way that suits their profile. The key output items are a selection of outputs by the applicant which may include scientific publications, but also other works that best show the impact of applicant's work on science and society. The research idea is used to gauge whether the applicant's CV fits the research.

Together with the pre-proposal, it is mandatory to submit an embedding guarantee, signed by the dean. With the embedding guarantee, the university declares that, if granted, the researcher will be given a research position and the opportunity to carry out the research within the institution, using all the facilities necessary for this purpose. The research position can be temporary, but must cover at least the duration of the proposed project. The embedding guarantee will be assessed by NWO and is one of the eligibility criteria. Based on his experience, Pol recommends that securing an embedding guarantee from the university should be the first step you take in the application process.

All eligible pre-proposals are assessed by a committee, and no external referees are involved in this stage. The assessment criteria include aspects like whether the applicant's qualities exceed what is customary in their peer group, the visibility and network of the applicant, their capability for generating innovative ideas, and if the key output items and academic profile align with the proposed research idea. The assessment committee ranks the applications, thereby makes a selection of applicants that can apply in the full-proposal phase, and advices the NWO board, who will then take the final decision. Applicants who receive a negative decision on their pre-proposal may not submit a full proposal.

Havva's first piece of advice to those considering applying: make sure your research idea is fully developed when you apply! Her own proposal was centred around a research idea that she already had and developed further to apply for the Veni. She points out that in the pre-proposal, there is very limited space to describe your research idea, but the time between the decision on the pre-proposal and the deadline for submitting the full proposal is too short to work out the details of the research proposal, as well as write it down clearly. So make sure you already know exactly what your plan is for the full proposal before you submit a pre-proposal.

Another important piece of advice from Pol: before you start writing, find out who your audience is. The committee which assesses the pre-proposal is discipline-specific, while the committee for the full proposal has a much broader composition. Of course, the proposal is also read by expert referees, so one has to strike a careful balance. Additionally, Pol notes, in the pre-proposal phase, don't be too modest!

Havva and Pol both stress that it is important to reach out and find help with preparing your application. Pol reached out to colleagues and reviewed successful proposals from previous years to get a better understanding of what was expected. Additionally, he received a lot of support from colleagues from his group. Their regular feedback was a crucial part of the (pre-)proposal writing process. He also had a number of peers applying to the Veni with whom he regularly discussed the applications.

Havva received significant support during the writing of her proposal from the Innovation & Impact Centre at TU Delft, who helped her improve not only the evidence-based CV part of the application, but also the research proposal itself. She notes that it was useful to have the Innovation & Impact Centre read her proposal, especially because they forced her to think more about the applications of her work. The evidence-based CV is still a fairly new concept in research funding applications and Havva is now paying it forward by sharing her evidence-based CV with colleagues as an example.

Full proposal phase

Applicants receiving a positive decision in the pre-proposal phase may submit a full proposal. The full proposal contains a more extensive description of the research proposal, including the overall aim and key objectives, the research plan, the alignment between the research proposal and the applicant's expertise and the motivation for the choice of host institute. Moreover, the expected impact of the proposed research has to be described. The applicant may choose to focus on achieving scientific impact, societal impact, or a combination of both, as long as they can motivate their choice well. Additionally, a budget plan and a section on data management have to be included in the full proposal, although these two sections are not considered in the committee's assessment.

The full proposal will be assessed on the basis of the following criteria:

1. quality and innovative character of the research proposal (75%),
2. scientific and/or societal impact (25%).

The first criterion includes the assessment of the potential of the proposed research to make an important contribution to the advancement of science, whether the proposed research goes beyond a gradual evolution of the applicant's current research, and whether the proposal aligns with the researcher's expertise. Furthermore, the scientific innovation, the clarity of the proposal and the balance between challenging elements and feasibility are judged.

The second criterion considers the motivation for the type of impact, as well as the means of achieving it. The committee assesses if the proposal includes an appropriate strategy and ambitious vision for the dissemination and/or implementation of results in the own discipline, the broader scientific field, and society if societal impact is considered. Additionally, if the chosen focus is primarily on either scientific or societal impact, it is assessed if proportional attention is given to increasing the opportunities for the other type of impact.

In the full proposal phase for the domains Science and AES, NWO will request input from at least two external referees. These are independent advisers who are experts in the subject of the proposal and will assess the proposal based on the criteria mentioned above. Subsequently, the applicant receives the anonymised referee reports and has the chance to react to the referee's comments in the form of a rebuttal.

The proposal, the referee reports and the rebuttal are then sent to the assessment committee. The committee will make its own assessment based on these documents. Depending on the domain, all applicants who submitted a full proposal or a selection of these applicants will enter the interview stage.

During the interview, the assessment committee has the opportunity to discuss their proposal with the applicant in a Q&A-style session. Following the discussion, the committee draws up a written advice addressed to the relevant decision-making body about the quality and ranking of the proposals. Finally, the relevant decision-making body will assess the procedure followed and the advice from the assessment committee. It will subsequently determine the final qualifications and take a decision about awarding or rejecting the proposals.

Pol admits that the days leading up to the interview were stressful, but that he enjoyed the actual interview. The committee asked interesting questions about the proposal that he liked answering. He prepared for difficult interview questions with professional interview trainers employed by his university, and feels that this was incredibly helpful. He recommends contacting them well in advance and to plan multiple sessions with them. Additionally, it is useful to ask experienced colleagues what kind of questions to expect.

Preparation with colleagues and the Innovation & Impact Centre was also essential for Havva as she worked towards her interview. She stresses the importance of doing mock interviews, especially as the interview panels tend to be broad and multidisciplinary, so you may get unexpected questions. Furthermore, training in scientific storytelling helped her prepare the five-minute presentation with which the interview for the Veni grant starts. Havva now enjoys sitting on the mock panels to help current Veni candidates prepare for their interviews. She hopes this will help them come out of the interview the same way she did: feeling like she had done everything she could, and that whatever the outcome was, she was happy with her performance.

Even after you obtained the grant and are preparing to start the project, there is a lot to learn, says Havva. It takes some know-how to obtain all the right signatures, especially if you have only just joined a new university. Havva ended up delaying the start of the Veni project, so she could finish up ongoing research and fulfil her teaching duties, but is now in full swing.

Pol concludes that he really likes the fact that full proposals are only requested from a small number of applicants because it feels like your full proposal will be taken more seriously this way. He learnt a lot from writing the full proposal, especially about how to craft a narrative that contains almost no jargon but still explains something about your research. He started his project in September 2024.

Information about the Veni programme can be found on the website of the NWO Talent Programme.[3]

Please note that depending on the domain you plan to submit your application, there may be minor deviations from the procedure (e.g., disciplinary or domain-wide/broad committees in the pre-proposal phase, external referees in the full proposal phase or interview selection). Please read the call for proposals and the information provided on the NWO website carefully before submitting a Veni proposal and contact an NWO staff member if you have any questions.

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[3] https://www.nwo.nl/en/calls/nwo-talent-programme