A recent analysis of the 2024 VIDI awardees by the Dutch national Network of Assistant Professors (APNet) reveals a systemic deviation from the VIDI programme's original mission. Conceived to support researchers transitioning from postdoctoral positions into independent scientific leadership, the VIDI has now become a mid-career consolidation grant. This shift undermines early-career researchers, restricts equity in funding, and jeopardizes the development of fresh, independent research programs in the Netherlands.

Our analysis is based on official NWO ('Nederlandse organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek'/ 'Dutch organisation for Scientific Research') releases as well as concerns raised by our members through an online survey and discussions. Given our findings and the recent progress in the European ERC eligibility window, we urge NWO to critically reflect on and reconsider the current structure of the VIDI scheme, particularly its eligibility criteria, panel/referee training and assessment process, to ensure it truly serves the next generation of scientific leaders and the population it was originally conceived to support. To assist in this direction, we outline the key issues below, along with our recommendations for ensuring an equitable scientific future for early-career researchers in Dutch academia, which can be adopted by other national research grant infrastructures that face similar challenges.

VIDI no longer supports the transition to independence

The VIDI is intended to support researchers who are "ready for the establishment of a research group or the expansion of a recent research group" (https://www.nwo.nl/en/calls/nwo-talent-programme-vidi-science-2024, accessed on 15.7.2025). However, our 2024 analysis of the Science Domain shows that the average VIDI recipient had 4.5 years of experience in an independent position and several awardees already held senior positions (UHDs, HL). This indicates that the target group of the Talent Scheme has shifted. The VIDI is now consolidating established careers rather than enabling the critical leap from postdoctoral researcher to independent Principal Investigator (PI). This systemic shift turns the VIDI from a launching pad to a reward mechanism, undermining its initial purpose and thereby its prestige, value and impact.

We strongly urge NWO to clarify their definition of talent for specific career stages and judge the applications accordingly. To this end, we propose shifting the eligibility criterion to reflect the years since the start of an independent research position rather than since the PhD acquisition date. This will ensure inclusivity across diverse career paths and better align with the scheme's intent. Additionally, NWO may want to consider better alignment with the recently modified ERC eligibility criteria for the Starting Grant. Naturally, such a change would propagate across the other instruments within the Talent Programme.

The preproposal project description is insufficient

Over 60% of the respondents to our survey indicated that the current 150-word limit for the pre-proposal project description is insufficient to convey the scientific quality, originality and relevance of the proposed research to the applicant's expertise.

To address this, we recommend introducing a longer, lay-friendly project description, ideally one A4 page or aligned with the ERC Starting Grant B1 format. This would improve clarity for non-expert reviewers and strengthen the link between the applicant's CV and proposal, which in turn would support a more transparent and clearer selection process aligned with the compatibility between CV and idea, while reducing the resubmission workload.

The review process and the quality of the reviews are insufficient

Our analysis of reviewer feedback clearly highlights a concerning lack of alignment between the evaluation criteria applied by the panels of assessors and the goals of the VIDI scheme. Comments such as "no seniority in papers" or "unable to secure (enough) money" reflect a misunderstanding of the grant's intended purpose, namely, to support researchers in establishing their group, and are not aligned with the recognition and rewards scheme. Instead, reviewers appear to apply criteria more appropriate for established PIs, yet again neglecting the intended target group. These issues point to a critical need for improved assessor training.

NWO must ensure that reviewers and the panel of assessors are well-informed about the objectives, eligibility criteria and evaluation guidelines of the VIDI scheme. We propose that NWO provide structured training to ensure that evaluators understand the scheme's intent and guidelines. Furthermore, including international reviewers and early-career scientists could help reduce institutional or geographic bias and bring more balanced, diverse perspectives to the assessment process.

Making the Talent Scheme fit for the current national context

Since NWO introduced the Talent Scheme 25 years ago, the instruments have seen relatively few changes. In light of today's rapidly evolving funding landscape, both nationally and internationally, it is worth asking whether the current structure of the Talent Scheme still meets the needs of the scientific community.

As NWO shapes its strategic agenda for the coming years, we urge them to seize this moment to critically reassess and modernize the entire suite of Talent Programme instruments. To remain future-proof, these instruments must continue to foster the bold, original research that fuels scientific and societal progress. Early-career researchers are a vital source of pioneering ideas, exactly the kind of high-risk, high-gain thinking the Talent Scheme was designed to support. Without transparent access and adequate resources, this creative potential risks being lost.

In this light, APNet welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this dialogue. We are eager to share perspectives and explore constructive pathways forward, based on ideas that have emerged from discussions within our community.

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