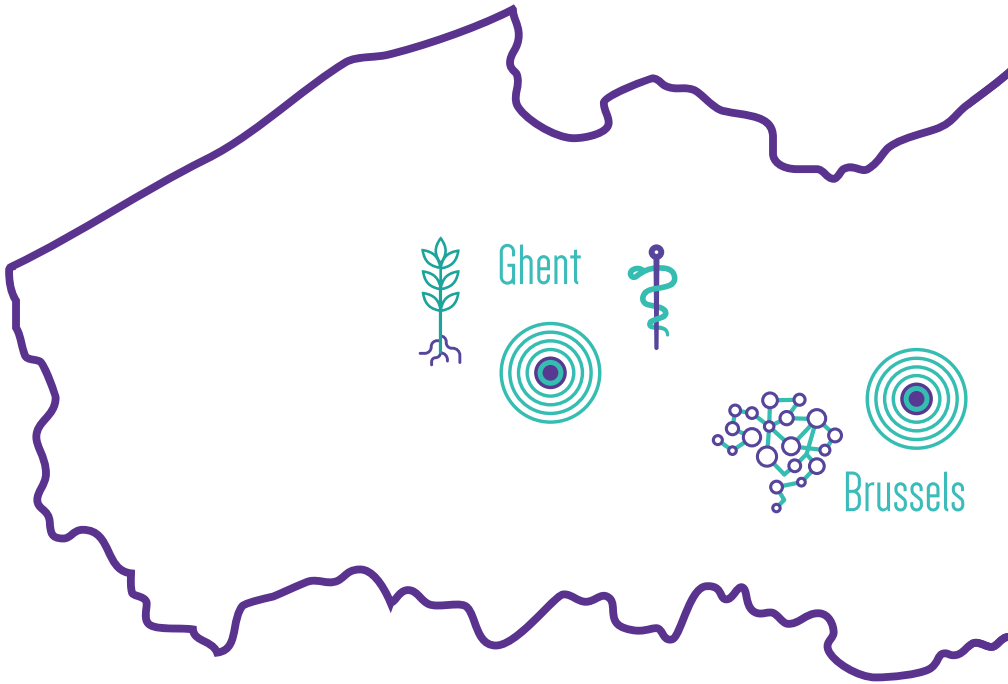




HOW TO WRITE A WINNING GRANT? tips & tricks





Inflammation Research

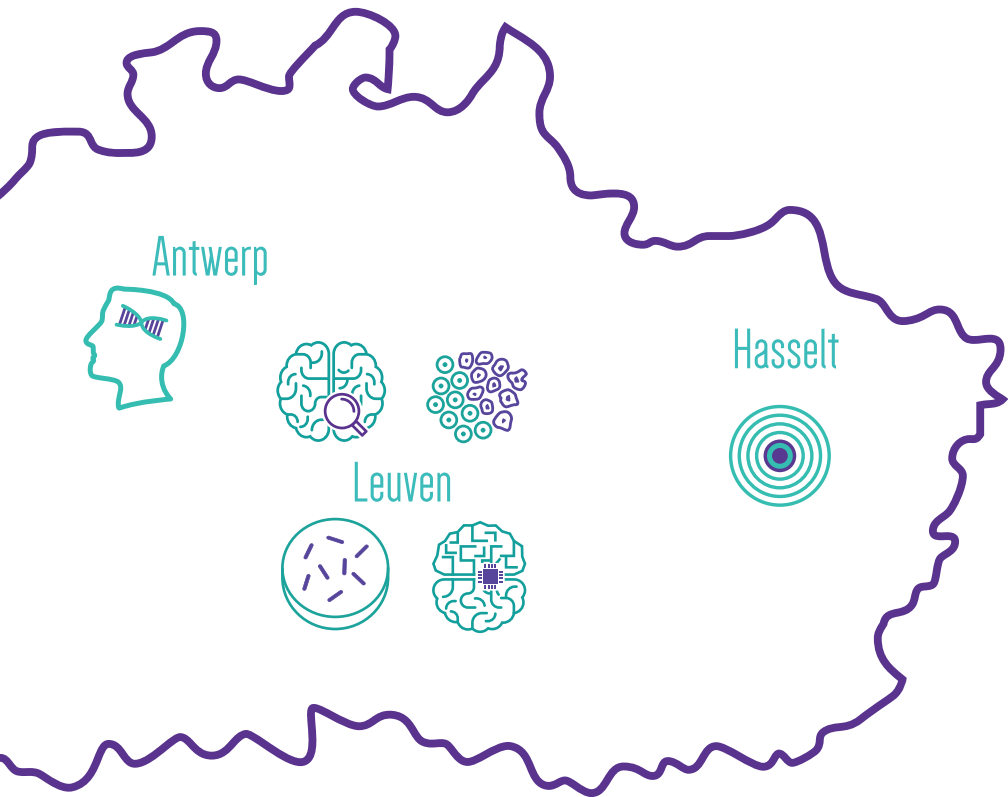


Plant Systems Biology



Medical Biotechnology





Molecular Neurology



Cancer Biology

Structural Biology



Microbiology

Brain & Disease Research



NERF

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FUNDING



Society needs promising research to increase our understanding of the mechanisms that rule life, growth, development, health and disease. Life science research is a lengthy and complex process that requires significant time and resources. Therefore, finding and attracting adequate funding is of great importance to life sciences researchers: research and funding go hand in hand. At VIB, we have access to many types of funding: from institutional over national and international funding including charity funding.

Most of the PhD students and postdocs at VIB find their own funding by applying for fellowships at the national or international level or from internal university sources. Obtaining such a grant is a real challenge as a junior researcher. It takes a lot of time and effort to write a grant, the evaluation process is as lengthy (taking a few months), and the success rate is typically as low as 10 to 15%.

This long strenuous process and the insecurity can be stressful, but, on the other hand, obtaining your own research grant is very rewarding. More importantly, it is a prerequisite on your CV for future academic positions. Obtaining a competitive grant in the life sciences means that you have identified a relevant biological question, that you are able to convincingly write down your ideas in a structured and clear manner, that you can build a strong research plan, can cope with deadlines, and that you take into account the administrative side of things. The latter might seem unimportant, but when not addressed properly it can seriously hamper your success.

This is where the VIB Grants Office comes in. Our grants team will help you in making sure that you properly follow the whole application process from identifying the funding that fits your needs, providing administrative support and giving feedback on the proposal itself. If you want to meet them, check the inside back cover of the booklet.

Wishing you all a lot of success in your endeavour to obtain research funding!

Lieve Ongena
Head of VIB Grants Office

Elien Vandermarliere
Grant Officer, VIB HQ



MAKING YOUR GRANT STAND OUT

A REVIEWER SHOULD BE ABLE TO REMEMBER AND 'RETELL' YOUR STORY AFTER ONE READING ROUND!

Typically, the **success rate for obtaining a grant is rather low**, about 10%. It is important to keep this in mind from the start. Moreover, grant reviewers read dozens of proposals during a day or a week. This is why your proposal must be outstanding. It must stand out and **catch the attention of the reviewer**; your proposal cannot be just like all the others. And yes, even Nobel Prize winners get their funding applications rejected. You are not the only one that needs to apply more than once to finally obtain funding for that one project you really want to pursue.

Reviewers are never wrong; reviewers are never right. They simply provide an assessment of the material that you provide in your application from their personal background. The review process is a matter of peers looking at your project idea and giving their feedback. It certainly does not come down to a mathematical formula.

Here are some tips to draw the attention of the reviewers.

Reviewers have expectations when they review proposals. They are looking for:

- Interesting, intriguing and innovative ideas that will contribute to the field
- Solid proof-of-concept data showing that the approach is promising
- Evidence that the applicant is qualified to do the research
- A crisp, specific project description with a research plan that is well thought out
- A clear and concise writing style

You need to **create a storyline**.

- The problem – introduce the problem and give a clear rationale why it needs to be solved
- The proposed solution – explain crystal clear and coherent what you will do to combat this problem
- The happily ever after – discuss how your project will impact the problem in the short and long term

This story must take the reader from a problem to a satisfying solution.

Make your proposal **scannable**.

Reviewers often need to go through many proposals within a review period. As such, they simply do not have the time to read each proposal in-depth.

- Avoid writing in lengthy sentences – opt for short, scannable sentences
- Consider bullet points
- Do not write jargon. If the reviewer is not familiar with the term, you might annoy them
- If there is a simple word you can use, use it
- Write for the generalist. Not every reviewer will be an expert in all aspects of your proposal

Besides poor grammar and spelling mistakes, inconsistency is another factor that can distract the reviewer and prevent him/her from focusing on the ideas presented. It is important to deliver consistent and uniform formatting, terminology, and acronyms throughout the grant proposal. This also shows respect to the reviewer who is spending quite some time in reading your proposal.

Make his/her life easy – make him/her smile!



TIPS FROM REVIEWERS

The most valuable tips & tricks to write a successful grant application come from reviewers themselves. They've experienced the process of going through large piles of applications and know best what triggers them to positively score a grant.

Here are some of their tips:

"Get someone else to read your application through before submission. You may think everything is crystal clear, yet **assumptions** may have crept in which are completely **obscure to the reader**. Logic may also not be totally solid: underlying hypotheses, for instance, may lurk without ever being spelled out. Such gaps will be obvious to someone who hasn't spent months constructing the text."

"Take care that your references are up to date and comprehensive. There is nothing that puts a reviewer off more than **suspecting you don't really know the field** well. An absence of references from within the past five years or a complete swathe of material missing does not confer confidence."

"Make sure any **figures** you include are **not so small** as to be impossible to read for the over-fifties without a magnifying glass. Make it easy for them to appreciate the points you are trying to make."

Dame Athene Donald – Churchill College, Cambridge

"The sales pitch mentality stretches to how I review grants. I want to know what I am buying. First and foremost, I want to see a **hypothesis**. Not buried on page seven after the justification of resources, but **on page one, line one, in bold**. I then **want my pulse quickened** with a unique selling point. Why does the work need to be done? If it is a fundamental question, why does it need answering? If it is translational, how will answering it make the world a better place? If that isn't clear, no amount of technical competence will save you."

John Tregoning – Imperial College London

“Typically, when two separate panels are asked to rank a set of grants, they will agree about the top 10% and bottom 5%. Beyond that, the choice of who gets funded is, by definition, a stochastic process; very few applications nowadays are complete turkeys. **The aim is to be in that top 10%.**”

“Another good piece of advice is to start early. Typically, 80 to 90 per cent of proposals arrive within 48 hours of deadlines. But the earlier you start, the more you can incubate, get feedback, and polish, polish, polish. Use figures. A **figure** really is **worth many words**. Flow diagrams can help enormously.”

Douglas B. Kell – University of Liverpool



Dame Athene Donald



Douglas B. Kell



John Tregoning



BEFORE YOU START WRITING

You have a great idea, a research project in mind, and you would like to have funding for it. Do not simply start writing! Keep the following steps in mind:

1. Choose the right funding agency

Some funding agencies provide funding for any type of research while other funding agencies only provide funding for research that focuses on a very specific topic or to researchers with a specific background.

It is hence very important to learn more about the **mission of the funding agency** you would like to submit your proposal to. Is their mission the training of promising scientists? Do they only fund interdisciplinary research? Or is the focus on a very specific topic such as immunology in cancer or Alzheimer's disease?

2. Learn everything about the funding agency

What projects do they fund? Look at who and **what got funded before**. Grant agencies typically list previous awardees online.

Look at the list of previous and current grant reviewers and ask yourself if their expertise overlaps with the aims and methodology of your proposal.

3. Check your eligibility

A funding agency typically applies several eligibility rules for applications. The funding might only be for postdoctoral researchers with less than 3 years of postdoctoral experience or the funding scheme can be restricted to (citizens of) a certain country.

4. Get familiar with the evaluation criteria and the order in which the information needs to be provided

Most funding agencies clearly describe their evaluation process and evaluation criteria. Reviewers are looking for these criteria when they evaluate your grant. Therefore, direct your reviewers to the answer to each of these criteria by using bold, underline, separate paragraph.

5. Comply with all the requirements of the funder

Typically, every funding agency asks you to apply a specific template for your grant application, a specific order in which you need to provide all the details of your project.

6. Be aware that you need at least two to three months to polish your grant. You can receive guidance **well in advance** from the Grants Office, by submitting your application request in grants.vib.be.

See also roadmap for writing a grant application. (see page 38)

Once you know your eligibility and the ins and outs of the funding agency you want to apply to, you can start writing. And while you are writing, keep the information you gained about the funding agency on a separate document at your desk. Address the focus of the funding agency, show that your project **perfectly fits** within their scope.



ABSTRACT

A reviewer's remark to keep in mind:

"IF I DON'T GET INTERESTED BY THE FIRST PAGE, THE PROPOSAL IS LOST."

ROBERT PORTER

The abstract is a very important part of your application. It is typically the first part of your proposal that is read and hence it is the place to **trigger** the scientific interest of the reviewer! Use the abstract to create excitement: **Intrigue – Convince – Inspire** your reviewers and spark their enthusiasm about your proposal. Your abstract should be a pleasure to read so that your evaluators are eager to read the full proposal.

We suggest that you use the following structure:

1. A brief background to the project including (the) key issue(s) and rationale - **WHY**
2. Your hypothesis/aim/objectives - **WHAT**
3. Your approach - **HOW**
4. The **IMPACT** of your project, e.g. on the research field and your personal research profile
5. Briefly state **WHY YOU** are the best candidate for this project and why your host institution or lab is the most suitable one, for example if you/your host have/has relevant preliminary results or a relevant skillset

As your abstract might become visible upon funding, make sure it does not contain confidential information.

The abstract is usually restricted in the number of characters or words and should therefore not contain irrelevant information.

Some tips to optimize your abstract.

Avoid redundancies

Final outcome → outcome

New innovations → innovations

Already existing → existing

Use simpler vocabulary

As a general rule → generally

A large number of → many

Is equipped with → contains

Write shorter sentences

One sentence should emphasize one idea

Never use a long word where a short one will do

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out

Never use the passive where you can use the active

It is expected → We expect

It can be assumed that → Assuming that



YOUR PROJECT IN A SINGLE FIGURE

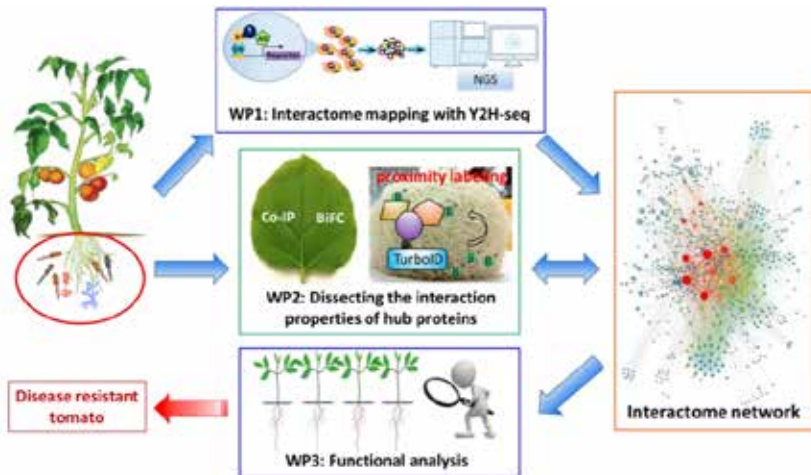
A FIGURE REALLY IS WORTH ONE THOUSANDS WORDS.

DOUGLASS B KELL

As the time of reviewers is limited and you want to grasp their attention as quickly as possible, a graphical abstract, a figure or scheme that provides a clear summary of your hypothesis or an overview of your project might do the trick. When the proposal structure allows it, the graphical abstract best comes at page 1 of the application e.g. below the abstract.

This graphical abstract can be used to show how your aims interrelate, depict study designs and demonstrate your anticipated results.

Some examples:.

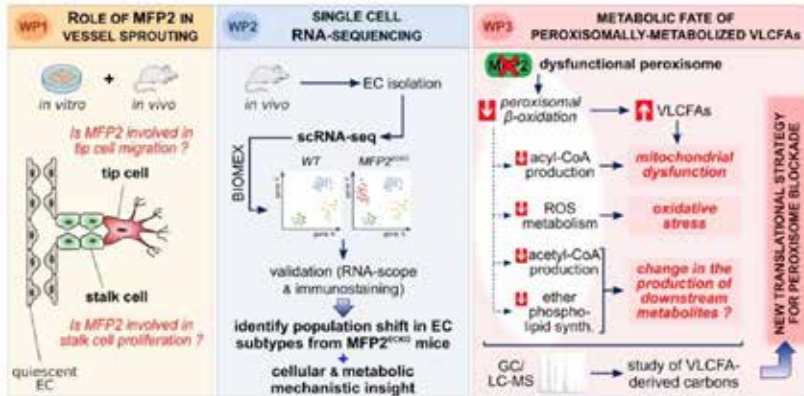


This figure from the group of Alain Goossens (VIB-UGent Center for Plant Systems Biology) details the project to map the tomato interactome and use this to provide disease resistance.

Apart from a graphical abstract, your proposal can gain a lot from good figures!

Reviewers typically lack the time to go over your project in detail. It is therefore strongly advised that **you help them**. You should make your text **scannable**, for example with the use of highlights and bullets. But figures can also save the reviewers a lot of time.

A **self-explanatory figure** gives much more information than an elaborate piece of text and one needs less time.



This figure from the group of Peter Carmeliet (VIB-KU Leuven Center for Cancer Biology) illustrates the three work packages of a project that investigates a new translational strategy for peroxisome blockades.

Our tips:

- Make sure that your figures are self-explanatory
- The legend should be clear and explain all symbols used.
- If you add text on your figures, make sure that this text is readable
- If you use an existing figure, make sure it is smartly edited and it does not contain references or words that are not relevant for your proposal
- If you use abbreviations in the figure, make sure you have a clear legend
- Make sure that your figure is clear, not only on your screen, but also as print out, yes even in black and white. The reviewer should not need to use a looking glass to understand your figure
- Do not mess up the numbering of your figures and tables

Besides the obvious choice for Microsoft Excel for charts and Microsoft PowerPoint for schemes, many other tools exist, and these often allow you to create figures and schemes of higher quality. Think about **GraphPad Prism** for charts and **Inkscape** for schemes or **BioRender** for figures.



STATE OF THE ART



Remember the 5 questions you need to address in the abstract?

In the state of the art you need to elaborate on the **WHY?** Why is this research necessary? Why should they fund this research? Why is this the right moment to carry out this research?

References

In this section, you need to describe the proposed work in the context of the state of the art of the field. References to the literature are an important part of the state of the art. We advise that **about half** of the references are **your own work** or from the lab you are part of, and the other half refer to other scientists in the field. This allows you to motivate why you are the best person to fulfil the project and illustrates your profound knowledge of the field. It demonstrates a deep knowledge of the state of the art in your field and allows you to substantiate how your proposal will be able to go beyond this state of the art.

Impact

It is also important to indicate how and why the proposed research is important for the field, and what **impact** it will have when successful.

Preliminary data

An important part of the state of the art can be your **preliminary data**, your **proof of concept**. What are your latest data that contribute to the state of the art? This can be a recent publication, but it can as well be data that you generated only very recently. In case of the latter, make sure not to provide too much details as your reviewer might be your competitor.

Stay tuned

Some funding agencies invite you for an **interview** as part of the evaluation process. This interview often takes place several weeks to months after you have written your state of the art. Hence, when you are preparing yourself for the interview, it is very important to go back to the state of the art. Are there recent publications? What is the main progress in the field? A lot can change in only a few weeks or months. Showing that you are up to date indicates that you continuously follow the field, that you stay interested, even though you did not yet receive the funding.



HYPOTHESIS

A strong hypothesis is the **corner stone of your application**.

The **hypothesis** of your research proposal states your **predictions about what you expect to find in your research**. It is a tentative answer to your research question that has not yet been tested.

A hypothesis is not just a guess – it should be based on existing theories and state of the art knowledge. It should be testable, which means you can support or abandon it through scientific research (such as experiments, observations and statistical analysis of data).

A hypothesis typically takes the form of an if-then statement. If ..., then ... creates a prediction which can be tested.

The following points form the basis of a strong hypothesis:

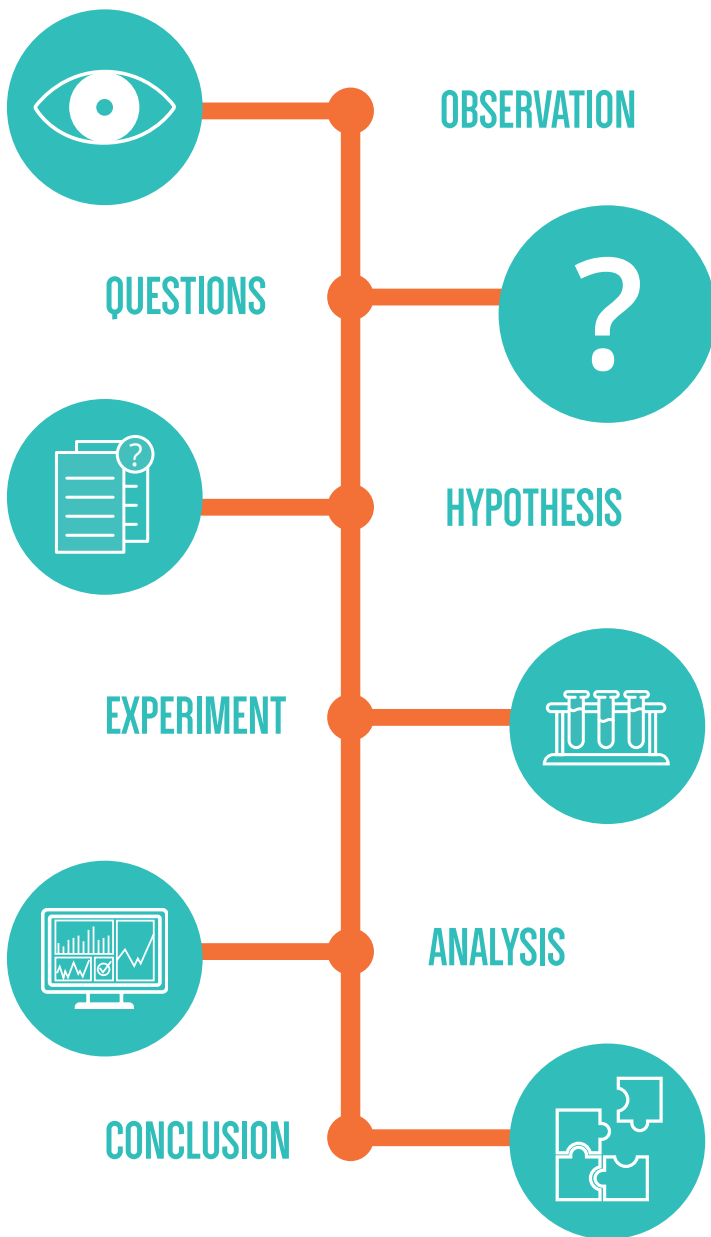
- Attempt to predict a specific result
- Can be tested: verified or falsified
- Neither too specific nor too general
- Considered valuable even if proven false

Typical problems with the hypothesis are:

- A weak hypothesis
- The hypothesis is too general
- General statements are being used
- There is no hypothesis at all
- Confusing the project's mission with the hypothesis
- Confusing the research question for the hypothesis
- 'I will develop a theory' statement

Remember that a **hypothesis does not have to be correct**. The hypothesis predicts what you expect to see. Within your project, you will perform experiments and analyse the generated data to test your hypothesis. However, you might find that the results of the experiments do not support the original hypothesis, that you need to revise your hypothesis.





OBJECTIVES



Your objectives are the answer to the **WHAT?** question. What will you do to test your hypothesis?

Here, it is important to have one **overarching research question** to which you can directly link two to five objectives depending on the duration of your project. This balance is very important. Too many objectives will penalize the feasibility of your proposal while too little objectives do not show your ambition.

While you are writing your proposal, it is important to keep the structure of the scientific method in mind as the basis of your proposal. Your observations are based on the state of the art. The **research question** is reflected in the objectives and the experiments and analyses should be described in the methodology.

The objectives section is **typically a short** section. It can simply be a brief description of your main research question, your hypothesis, followed by a list of objectives/aims which are typically reflected in your work packages.

Typical pitfalls are:

- Your project is **not focussed and lacks coherence**.
It is important to explicitly explain the key issues and clearly focus on the challenges. Focus on one solution.
- The scope of your project is **too broad**.
All activities described within the project need to be key to answer the research question.
Don't try to fit all the research in your lab into the proposal. It is perfectly OK that other research topics of your lab are funded by other research projects.

Alternative starting points are:

- **Methodology-driven research** → your starting point can be a very specific methodology that you master.
- **Exploration of data** → in case you have exclusive access to a huge amount of unexplored data. Do be careful with the exploration of data as some funding agencies might consider this as fishing expeditions.



METHODOLOGY

In this section of your proposal you need to give answers to the **HOW?** question. How will you approach your research question, how will you address your aims? You need to describe the main activities and methods, and the tools and technologies that you will use.



ROAD MAP

aims are reflected in work packages

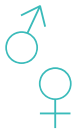
Describe the proposed methodology in detail including, when appropriate, key intermediate goals (tasks and deliverables). Explain and justify the methodology in relation to the state of the art, including any particularly novel or unconventional aspects. Highlight intermediate stages where results may require adjustments to the project planning. If applicable, include concrete numbers of patients, strains, samples to show that you have seriously thought about the project.

In case you rely on a collaboration to execute some of the work, you need to justify this collaboration. This should be done by emphasizing the scientific added value the collaborator brings to the project. Why do you collaborate with this person? Is (s)he the best in the field? Does (s)he have exclusive access to a technology or a set of samples?

For every objective or work package, you need to address the following points:

- What is the strategy and main methodology?
- What needs to be achieved? What are the main tasks?
- Why in this way? Explain the rationale.
- How will this be achieved? Provide in depth detail of resources, data, methods, parameters, analysis, statistics and interpretation.
- If experts are involved: which experts and why did you select them?

A scheme to illustrate the interlinkage between the different work packages is highly recommended.



Sex and gender analysis is a topic that is typically overlooked in the methodology section. It is important to consider how your research design (activities and/or outcome) can be influenced by biological characteristics (sex) and/or social-cultural factors (gender) and explain how you will address them. E.g. will you use a combination of female/male mice? Will you use cell lines that are derived from female/male origin?





RISK ASSESSMENT

The feasibility of your proposal is typically an important evaluation criterium. An in-depth risk assessment illustrates that your project is well thought out and will help the reviewer to estimate the feasibility.

Start with explaining why you expect the project is feasible: how does your experience and expertise allow you to carry out the project? What is available at your host lab? Infrastructure and access to resources, logic workplan and proof of concept.

Next, you need to explain how you will deal with the risks: what is your backup plan, what are the consequences of changes? Identify intermediate stages that are key in being successful.

The easiest way to approach your risk assessment is per work package. You need to list the possible pitfalls and provide an alternative. Shortly describe why the alternative is not your first option.

The risk assessment is typically not a mandatory part of a project proposal, it is in general not added as field/topic to address in your proposal. However, we strongly advise you to add a minimum risk assessment to your proposal.

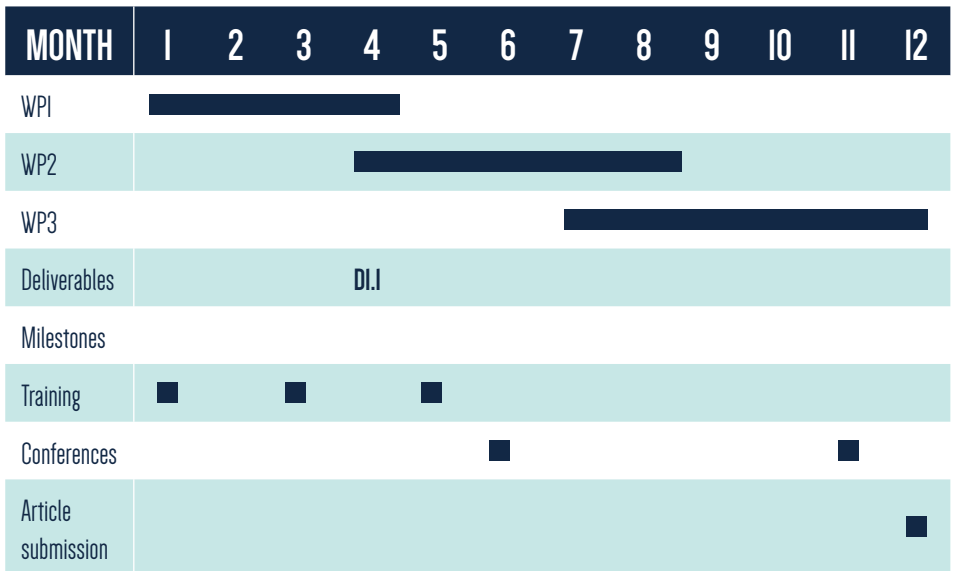


GANTT CHART



The Gantt chart allows you to schematically summarize your project. It gives you the opportunity to provide a lot of information (work packages, tasks, milestones, timing, resources) and to convince the reviewer of the feasibility of your project. Don't make your Gantt chart too sophisticated.

An example:



Depending on the length of your project, you can provide information per month, quarter or year.

Our advice:

- Projects of 1 year – provide monthly information
- Projects up to 3 years – provide information per quarter
- Projects > 3 years – provide information per six months or per year

Some funding agencies specify this division in their guidelines.

A Gantt chart is not always required. However, we strongly advise you to add a Gantt chart if space and format allow it.



PUBLIC OUTREACH

Many funding agencies realize the importance of communicating with the general public about the research they fund. Therefore, you will need to address public outreach during the implementation of your grant.

In this section, you can rely on several initiatives that are organised by the VIB communication team:

- Yearly Biotech day
- Science on the road program
- Press releases

Make sure you understand these initiatives (check the VIB website) and write in your own words how you will contribute to this – do not simply refer to these ‘host’ initiatives – they want to know how YOU will be contributing.

Apart from these general initiatives at host level, it is worthwhile to consider setting up your own initiative. You can start a mini-website, a blog, a twitter account or a Facebook page in which you elaborate on your research. Such a communication channel should not only be talking about your results but also about your research itself, the difficulties you encounter, stories from the lab, the connection between your research and the current developments. VIB’s communication team is always available to help you, so don’t hesitate to reach out to them.

When you write this section, you need to think about your possible audiences: general public, patients, caretakers, ... and the impact you expect to have with your communication. Next, you need to make sure that the channel you use is appropriate for that audience.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY



When you are new to science, intellectual property (IP) and tech transfer is typically not something that you associate with research. However, they go hand in hand. It is therefore important to reflect on this when you write a grant. Do you foresee any IP that could come out of the proposed research? How will you deal with this? How could the results be translated to a commercial setting?

As you are part of VIB, you can rely on the VIB tech transfer team for the exploitation of your results. They have a long and successful track-record of filing patent applications, managing IP, negotiating R&D collaborations with industry, initiating start-up, etc. They are there to help you.

Typically, funding agencies refer to dissemination and exploitation as two different terms. Here is the difference between dissemination and exploitation of scientific results.

- **Dissemination:** public disclosure of the results. This includes scientific publications and conferences.
- **Exploitation:** What is the future use of your results? The development of products/ processes, creating and providing service.



ADDRESSING THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL



One of the European Commission's commitments is to tackle climate and environmental-related challenges. The European green deal outlines a set of principles to which researchers are encouraged to adhere during the implementation of their project.

Some best practices are:

- Avoidance of negative environmental impact
- Minimising and sorting waste and by-products
- Minimising harmful emission
- Prioritizing low carbon options in all forms of transportation
- Teleconferencing tools as a complement to physical mobility
- Minimising the use of energy and water

Indeed, some researchers might not be able 'to green' their project due to the nature of the research: requirement of certain chemicals, excessive use of water, etc. Creating awareness is therefore central.



CURRICULUM

When applying for funding, it is typically not only the project that is evaluated, but also YOU based on your CV. Are you the only person able to bring the proposed project to a conclusion?

Many funding agencies apply a page limit to the CV. It is important to use the given number of pages to your advantage. We recommend that you start your CV with a short paragraph on your research profile including research interests, the development of these and obtained achievements. Here, you can provide the reviewers with an insight into your research motivation, your major achievements or most significant contributions so far. This personal statement is your unique opportunity to 'talk to the reviewer' and highlight that you are an outstanding researcher with a passion for science and a promising future.

More senior researchers can fall back on their achievements in this introduction. As a junior researcher, you can use this introduction to give a personal motivation of your research interest. You can be interested in brain research because your grandmother has dementia or you would really like to focus on diabetes research so that you can make to life of your best friend with diabetes easier.

Points to address in your CV:

- Personal information: name, ORCID, website, ...
- Education
- Current and previous positions
- (Invited) Oral and poster presentations
- Supervision of students
- Teaching activities
- Institutional responsibilities
- Reviewer activities
- Publications – manuscripts that are in preparation or under review should not be part of this list.

In your summary, we strongly advise you to start with the most recent details. These are typically most relevant to your proposal.

YOUR PROPOSAL IS FINAL



WHEN YOU THINK YOUR PROPOSAL IS READY FOR SUBMISSION, IT IS NOT.

Typically, you have spent a lot of time on writing your proposal; you know all the ins and outs of your project. This is the stage where you will most likely miss illogical steps, minor typos, missing words and other trivialities.

It is therefore strongly advised to **approach an 'outsider' to review your proposal** before submission. In addition to the service of the VIB Grants Office which is involved from an early stage, ask a colleague scientist to provide feedback on your project and this with the following questions in mind:

- **Is your project easy to understand?**

It is important to keep in mind that your reviewers might not all be specialists in your field of research. It is therefore important that an informed postdoctoral researcher can understand your project and is able to remember it after one round of reading. Avoid the use of jargon and identify every abbreviation.

- **Is the narrative flow logical?**

Make sure that it is clear how 'a' and 'b' become 'c', that there are no jumps in logic.

- **Is (s)he excited about the project?**

Not only you, but also your reviewers should be excited about the proposal. Therefore, it is important that reviewers do not have the feeling that they are reading a science textbook but rather a fascinating text that triggers their curiosity.

Once you have incorporated these suggestions, your project is ready for submission.



WHAT ABOUT FEEDBACK?

Apart from receiving feedback prior to your submission, feedback from colleague scientists or feedback from the grant officers, in most cases you will also receive feedback from your reviewers once they have decided about the final outcome of your proposal. It is good to try to divide this feedback into the following 3 categories:

- **Category 1** – high importance, **go-no go feedback**

This feedback typically refers to the scientific content, the concept, or the methodology – this can be a showstopper or in contrast the main reason for funding.

- **Category 2** – nice to have

This is typically more technical feedback. This feedback did not determine the go-no go decision.

- **Category 3** – low importance

These comments do not refer to the essence of the grant application. This feedback can be considered as irrelevant, unexplained, unjustified or personal.

As mentioned earlier, even Nobel Prize winners get their funding applications rejected. In general, you will need to apply more than once to finally obtain funding for that one project you really want to pursue.

When you resubmit your proposal, either to the same funding agency or a different one, it is important to take the feedback from reviewers into account. This feedback should be the basis to start your re-application. A simple approach to weight the importance of feedback is to count how many reviewers commented on the same issue. A recurrent issue needs to be addressed.

For the different categories:

- **Category 1** – Do you need to revise the concept or scientific presentation?
- **Category 2** – Consider which comments to address and which not.
- **Category 3** – Consider what in the document made the reviewer think that way, something might have been misleading or controversial.



Things to keep in mind when you **resubmit** your proposal:

- Determine if there is a **showstopper**
- **Timing**
 - Is the project still timely?
 - Does it still fit within your timing?
- Resubmission is **NOT copy-paste**
- **Revisit**
 - Your hypothesis and scientific concept
 - The state of the art
 - Your CV, publications and track record
 - Templates and technical updates



WHEN YOU ARE INVITED FOR AN INTERVIEW

Congratulations! You have made it to the next hurdle in your grant application. You are invited for an interview during which you can defend your proposal.

An interview typically involves two parts: a short presentation of the project with or without support of visuals and a questions and answer part.

During the short presentation, you need to **bring a clear, brief message** that **excites** the reviewers and that they **can remember**. You need to communicate who you are, what you are going to do and how this will be beneficial for science and the community. We advise you to follow the rules of a good elevator pitch carefully preparing the **answer to the 5 main question**:

- **What?** – What are you going to do?

Start by describing what (research) question you will address. Make sure that you are clear and to the point. To make a strong point, you might need a brief state-of-the-art introduction – but make it very brief and get to your research question early on.

- **Why?** – Why is this important?

Focus on the research question you want to solve and the impact on the research field/society. This can be a long(er) term impact (beyond the project).

- **How?** – How are you going to do it?

Focus on the most innovative, unique approaches in your project. No real need to discuss each work package unless it really matters to indicate your smart choice of approaches.

- **Why you?**

Explain why you are the best person to perform the research. What is your knowledge, your expertise? Why should they give you the money and not another applicant?

- **Why now?**

Why is this the perfect moment to perform the research? E.g. building on new knowledge that recently became available, building on innovative technologies that

were recently introduced in the field or developed in your lab.

When you have formulated the answer to each section of your pitch, put it all together. Then, try to cut out anything that does not absolutely need to be there. Your pitch needs to be snappy and compelling.

It goes without saying that it is important to have your pitch memorized and practiced. Rehearse your pitch with people from different backgrounds: colleagues or friends and ask them for feedback. Obviously, the Grants Office can also make time for you to practice and give advice to your pitch!

Finally, keep in mind that **your pitch should excite!** And moreover, it should excite you first! If you do not get excited about your research, neither will your audience, your reviewers. Your pitch should bring a smile to your face. The reviewers have read your proposal; hence, they can anticipate what you will say but not how you will bring your message. If you bring your message with passion, they will likely remember your energy and enthusiasm, your eagerness to start the project.



THE IDEAL TIMELINE

When is the best moment to start writing your grant application? As early as possible! Starting well in advance allows you to polish, polish and polish your application, to receive feedback from colleagues, from the Grants Office... You need to set aside twice the time you think you need to write your application.

CONCEPT (3 months)



- Discuss the proposal with your PI
- Get the commitment of your PI
- Meet with the Grants Office to plan your application and get info about the call

DRAFT VERSION (2 months)



- Go over the application with the Grants Office (you can send us your first draft)
- Work on their suggestions

PREFINAL VERSION (2 weeks)



- Hand in your complete proposal to the Grants Office for a final review
- Work on their suggestions

DEADLINE



- Submit your grant proposal

THE GRANTS OFFICE IS THERE TO HELP YOU

help!

As researchers rely heavily on competitive grants for funding, VIB launched its international Grants Office in spring 2017. The office covers every stage of the grant application process, from training, eligibility advice, administrative issues to pre-application peer review. This guidance starts well before the actual application as the Grants Office also guides you through the different funding opportunities. To maximize the expertise available, the Grants Office connects to people at the different research centers involved in all aspects of grant applications for their center to build an institution-wide grants team.

Once a funding opportunity is selected, this team guides you through the application process with personal advice, guidelines and templates for the application, and proofreading. We also provide you with the necessary signatures or institutional documents when needed.

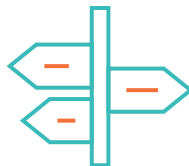
Moreover, VIB organizes two courses that are dedicated to grant writing:

- How to write a winning grant proposal
- ERC applications for starters and consolidators: tips & tricks

In order to allow continuous improvement in this grant guidance process, the VIB Grants Office decided to digitize all steps of this grant identification and application process. In close collaboration with the IT department, VIB developed grants.vib.be. Grants.vib.be is a platform to identify, plan and track step by step guidance during your grant application process. It is a digital tool that streamlines and simplifies the grant application process which allows you to keep track of your grant application process and running grants.



FIND



GUIDANCE



KEEP TRACK

FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek) supports fundamental and strategic research within a Flemish research institute or university. Many scientists at VIB are funded by these PhD and postdoctoral fellowships.

PHD FELLOWSHIPS

PhD fellowship fundamental research: challenging and innovative research

PhD fellowship strategic basic research: innovation-oriented research that might lead to applications with an economic added value

DEADLINE
beginning of March

DURATION
2 years + 2 years

BUDGET
salary and bench fee

FWO POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS

Junior postdoctoral fellowship:
PhD obtained less than three years before the 1st of October of the year in which the fellowship starts (check exceptions)

Senior postdoctoral fellowship:
PhD obtained between three and six years before the 1st of October of the year in which the fellowship starts (check exceptions)

DEADLINE
beginning of December

DURATION
3 years

BUDGET
salary and bench fee

HOW TO APPLY?

Online application through the e-loket of FWO.

DOCUMENTS NEEDED FOR THE APPLICATION:

- Abstract of the proposal (in English & Dutch)
- Ethics self-assessment (if applicable)
- Data management plan
- Motivation statement
- Position of the project within the lab, the national and international context
- Communication towards the non-expert audience
- Project outline (max 10 pages)
 - State of the art
 - Research objectives
 - Methodology
 - References

<https://www.fwo.be/>



MSCA POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action fellowships are prestigious postdoctoral grants funded by the European Commission. Mobility is key in these fellowships. You have to move to another country: you can come from abroad to join VIB or go abroad after your research stay at VIB. Another important aspect is transfer of knowledge, both from the host lab to the researcher and from the researcher to the host lab.

EUROPEAN FELLOWSHIPS

- For a postdoctoral research stay in an EU member state or associated country
- 24 months
- Restart fellowships: to restart your career after a career break of at least one year
- Reintegration fellowships: to return to Europe after a research stay abroad

GLOBAL FELLOWSHIPS

- For a research stay outside Europe
- Followed by a mandatory one-year return period to Europe
- 36 months (24 months outside Europe – 12 months within Europe)

DEADLINE

beginning of September

BUDGET

Living and mobility allowance, and if applicable a family allowance

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

PhD certified by the appropriate documents

Maximum 8 years full time equivalent experience post PhD

HOW TO APPLY?

Online application through the EU portal.

DOCUMENTS NEEDED FOR THE APPLICATION:

- **PART A** – Administrative details to upload in the boxes on the EU portal
- Ethics self-assessment
- **Part B1** (max 10 pages)
 - **Section 1: Excellence**

Here, you need to address the state of the art, the two-way transfer of knowledge
What will you gain from the host lab and what will the host lab gain from you?

- **Section 2: Impact**

What is the impact of the fellowship on your career, on society?

How will you communicate, exploit, disseminate about the project and its results?

- **Section 3: Implementation**

In this section, you need to describe your workplan. A very important part is the Gantt chart.

- **PART B2**
 - **Section 4: CV (max 5 pages)**
 - **Section 5: List of participating organizations (1page per lab)**
 - **Section 6: Ethical aspects**

https://ec.europa.eu/research/mariecurieactions/actions/individual-fellowships_en

EMBO fellowships are awarded to support postdoctoral research visits throughout Europe and the world. International exchange is therefore key in EMBO fellowships.

EMBO LONG-TERM FELLOWSHIPS

DURATION

2 years

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

- PhD obtained less than 2 years prior to the application date
- Applicants cannot have worked for longer than 6 months in the host lab prior to their application.

EMBO SHORT-TERM FELLOWSHIPS

The aim of these visits is to support collaborations between research groups and to apply techniques that are unavailable in the applicant's laboratory.

DURATION:

up to 3 months

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

At least one year of research experience at PhD-level.

DEADLINE

Applications can be sent throughout the year

BUDGET:

living and travel allowance

HOW TO APPLY?

- Online application
- All information needs to be provided in boxes; no documents need to be uploaded

INFORMATION NEEDED FOR THE APPLICATION:

- Contact details of 2 referees
 - For long-term fellowships: one referee needs to be your PhD-supervisor
 - For short-term fellowships: one referee needs to be your current supervisor
- Contact details of the receiving institute & motivation of the lab of choice
 - In this motivation, you can refer to the knowledge and expertise you will gain from joining this lab
- Proposed work (max 1.500 words)
 - We strongly advise you to address the following points: state of the art, objectives, methodology, workplan and risk assessment
- Curriculum Vitae
- Administrative details

<https://www.embo.org/>



FEBS FELLOWSHIPS

FEBS fellowships allow members of a FEBS constituent society to work in a laboratory in an academic institution in a different FEBS country from the one they are normally working in. Hence, mobility is required. The fellowships should focus on biochemistry and molecular biology.

FEBS LONG-TERM FELLOWSHIPS

DURATION

1 year but can be renewed up to a maximum of three years

DEADLINE

beginning of September

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

PhD obtained less than 3 years ago

BUDGET

living and travel allowance

MEMBERSHIP

You need to be member of a FEBS constituent society

HOW TO APPLY

Online application

FEBS SHORT-TERM FELLOWSHIPS

DURATION

2 to 3 months

DEADLINE

Applications can be made throughout the year and at least two months before the proposed starting date

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

PhD obtained less than 6 years ago or at least one published paper as a main author in an international scientific journal

Documents and information needed for the application:

- Eligibility details – In this section you need to provide details about your PhD
- Referee details
You need an experienced scientist to support your application. This scientist should be acquainted with your work but cannot work at your host institute. It is your responsibility to ensure that (s)he submits the support letter before the deadline.
- Personal details
- Academics details – such as CV, expertise, current research topic, publications and other qualifications (contributions to conferences, awards & fellowships, teaching experience)
- This information must be provided in boxes.
- Mobility details – details about the home & host institute
- Project details – such as start date, duration and keywords
- Documents to upload
 - Host acceptance form (a template is available)
 - FEBS membership confirmation
 - PhD award confirmation (only for long-term fellowships)
 - The research proposal
 - **Short-term fellowships:** max 4 pages
Points to address:
 - Workplan and experimental setup
 - Motivation to perform the work in another lab in another country
 - Motivation of the host lab
 - Motivation of the duration of the fellowship
 - **Long-term fellowships:** max 6 pages
Points to address:
 - The objective of the fellowship: the purpose and immediate and longer-term aims
 - Background
 - The workplan (Gantt chart) and methodology
 - The state of the art in the international context
 - Motivation of the host lab – How does the host lab fit within your long-term goals?



ERC GRANTS

ERC (European Research Council - European Commission) funding is an investigator-driven type of funding; it is bottom-up funding. It is aimed at independent research that has the potential to introduce new concepts or a paradigm shift. Your project idea needs to be innovative, not just new. Scientific excellence is key in ERC funding.

ERC STARTING GRANT

DEADLINE

mid-October

BUDGET

1.5Mio euro for 5 years

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

PhD obtained between 2 to 7 years prior to the 1st of January of the call year (check exceptions)

ERC ADVANCED GRANT

DEADLINE

at the end of August

BUDGET

2.5Mio euro for 5 years

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

solid 10-years track record

ERC CONSOLIDATOR GRANT

DEADLINE

at the beginning of February

BUDGET

2.0Mio euro for 5 years

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

PhD obtained between 7 to 12 years prior to the 1st of January of the call year (check exceptions)

HOW TO APPLY?

Online application through the EU portal

DOCUMENTS NEEDED FOR THE APPLICATION:

- **Part A** – Administrative details to upload in the boxes on the EU portal
- Ethics self-assessment
- **Part B1**
At evaluation step 1, only this part of the proposal is accessible to the panel members.
 - Extended synopsis (max 5 pages)
Here, you have to focus on the WHY and WHAT of your project and shortly describe the HOW without going in too much technical details.
 - Curriculum vitae (max 2 pages)
 - Funding ID
 - Track-record (max 2 pages)
- **Part B2** – Scientific proposal (max 15 pages)
At evaluation step 2, both B1 and B2 are accessible to the reviewers and panel members.
 - State of the art and objectives
 - Specify clearly the objectives of the proposal (WHAT), in the context of the state of the art in the field (WHY).
 - Methodology - HOW
 - Resources

<https://erc.europa.eu/>

ROADMAP FOR WRITING A GRANT APPLICATION



ROAD MAP

aims are reflected in work packages



FINAL PROPOSAL

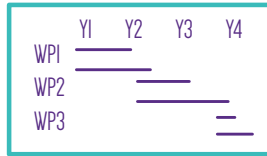
build a 'story' around your road map:
state of the art, objectives
and methodology (motivation
and risk assessment)





WHAT? WHY? HOW? WHY YOU? WHY NOW?

the answer to these 5 questions is the outline of your abstract and the basis of your proposal



GANTT CHART

allocate your WPs, tasks, deliverables and milestones over the dedicated time



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Basic research in life sciences is VIB's raison d'être. VIB is an independent research institute where some 1,500 top scientists from Belgium and abroad conduct pioneering basic research. As such, they are pushing the boundaries of what we know about molecular mechanisms and how they rule living organisms such as human beings, animals, plants and microorganisms.

Based on a close partnership with five Flemish universities – Ghent University, KU Leuven, University of Antwerp, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Hasselt University – and supported by a solid funding program, VIB unites the expertise of all its collaborators and research groups in a single institute.

VIB's technology transfer activities translate research results into concrete benefits for society, such as new diagnostics and therapies and agricultural innovations. These applications are often developed by young start-ups from VIB or through collaborations with other companies. This also leads to additional employment and bridges the gap between scientific research and entrepreneurship.

VIB also engages actively in the public debate on biotechnology by developing and disseminating a wide range of science-based information. More information can be found at www.vib.be

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