

# Science Committee

Procedures for **VU/VUmc**  
**research proposals**  
that will be embedded in  
**Amsterdam Public Health**



Amsterdam Public Health

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## Introduction

Currently, the EMGO<sup>+</sup> Institute is in a transition towards the Amsterdam Public Health (henceforth APH) research institute by merging its EMGO<sup>+</sup> research with the Public Health research of the AMC. This transition is part of the alliance between VUmc and AMC. From January 2017 onwards all our EMGO<sup>+</sup> activities are part of APH. This means that all our research will be embedded into one of the eight research programs of APH. At the same time we will settle all current EMGO<sup>+</sup> affairs properly.

In anticipation of definite decisions concerning APH-procedures, the methodological quality of research proposals submitted to the Science Committee will be assessed in accordance with existing EMGO<sup>+</sup> procedures. Additionally, we will embed all research proposals that are submitted after January 1, 2017, into one of the eight APH research programs.

Consequently, all research proposals that are submitted to the Science Committee after January 1, 2017, will be forwarded to the new APH program leaders of VU/VUmc to check for suitability and relevance for the respective APH program (previously, this was the task of the program leaders of the four EMGO<sup>+</sup> programs).

In this transition period, the assessment concerning scientific quality and feasibility will be in accordance with EMGO<sup>+</sup> procedures.

## Tasks of the Science Committee

The Science Committee's main task is to assess the methodological quality and feasibility of the VU/VUmc research proposals submitted, in order to embed the research in APH.

Other roles of the Science Committee are to:

- assess applications for internal calls, such as travel grants and fellowships;
- assess the suitability and relevance of proposals for inclusion in the Innovational Research Incentives Scheme (in particular VENI proposals);
- prioritize proposals that are subject to internal pre-selection (e.g. NWO medium-sized investment grants);
- coordinate and assess applications for APH grants and awards (such as APH awards and travel grants).

This document describes the procedures for [Reviewing research proposals](#).

## Definitions

- ***VU/VUmc project within APH***

Which proposals are eligible for review by the Science Committee?

The Science Committee assesses proposals for research projects that have not yet been started and that will be executed by a junior or senior researcher.

Proposals are not reviewed if APH's contribution to the project is limited to an advisory role by an APH staff member.

If a proposal is approved by the APH-VU/VUmc Director based on recommendations by the program directors and the Science Committee, it is considered an APH project.

- ***Start of project***

The start of a project is defined as the time at which the first patient is included/the first measurement is performed. This definition is in line with the definition used by the medical ethics committee, METc.

## Reviewing research proposals

We distinguish between various types of proposals:

1. [Standard research project proposals](#)
2. [Program grant proposals](#) (with multiple projects)
3. [Ongoing research projects](#)
4. [Internship project](#)
5. [Doctoral plan of study for non-VUmc employed junior researchers/PhD students](#)
6. [Doctoral plan of study for VUmc employed junior researchers/PhD students](#) (embedding of approved PhD theses)

Fixed procedures apply for the assessment of:

7. [Projects that have already been approved by another science committee](#)
8. [Infrastructure projects](#)

In some cases it may not be entirely clear whether a research project has a scientific basis. Where there are doubts, a fixed procedure is followed to check whether this is the case ([Doubts as to whether the research project has a scientific basis](#)).

## 1. Review of standard research project proposals by Science Committee

Event	Action	Who	Timelines
Decision to have the Science Committee evaluate the proposal	Check for completeness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timelines/research implementation plan</li> <li>• Budget</li> <li>• Staffing</li> </ul>	Secretary of Science Committee	1 working day
Proposal considered to be incomplete	Ask applicants to provide additional information	Secretary of Science Committee	1 working day
Proposal considered to be complete	Send to program directors to check for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suitability</li> <li>• Relevance for APH</li> </ul>	Secretary of Science Committee/ Program directors	2 weeks
Proposal considered suitable and relevant	<a href="#">Decide on type of review</a> Assign reviewers	Secretary of Science Committee	1 week
Proposal sent to reviewers	Assess proposal for methodological quality and feasibility	Reviewers	2 weeks
Reviewers' reports received	Register and process assessments (see pages 6/7)	Secretary of Science Committee	1 working day
Assessment not yet finalized	Inform applicants If necessary, call in third reviewer		
Assessment finalized	Send recommendation to Director		
Recommendation sent to Director	Final decision by Director	Director of APH	1 week
Final decision by Director	Send notification letters to applicants and responsible professor	APH secretariat	1 week

## Decide on type of review

### Proposal

- |   |   |                                      |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Has not yet been sent to/accepted by grant provider    | → | <a href="#">extensive assessment</a> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted by grant provider without peer review process | → | <a href="#">extensive assessment</a> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Accepted by grant provider with peer review process*   | → | <a href="#">general assessment</a>   |

### \* Grant providers with peer review process:

- NWO and related organizations (e.g. ZonMw, WOTRO)
- Netherlands Heart Foundation (*Hartstichting*)
- NIH (NHLBI, NCI, NINDS)
- Dutch Cancer Society, KWF (including Alpe d'HuZes)
- WCRF
- Diabetes Fund
- EU
- Dutch Arthritis Foundation (*Reumafonds*)
- Netherlands Asthma Foundation (*Longfonds, voorheen Astmafonds*)
- Netherlands Brain Foundation (*Hersenstichting*)

### Extensive assessment

If a proposal has not been accepted by a grant provider or if it has been accepted by a grant provider without an external peer review process, both the methodological quality and the feasibility of the proposal will be reviewed by two reviewers (one member of the Science Committee and one external reviewer). Assessment of the methodological quality includes a review of the central research question, the research design and the plan of analysis. The feasibility of the proposal is assessed on the basis of the work plan, staffing and budget.

Review:

- 2x “Positive, possibly with comments” → recommendation to Director to embed the research in APH
- 1x “Positive, possibly with comments” + 1x “Negative with comments” → third reviewer (member of the Science Committee)
- 2x “Negative with comments” → this is viewed as a provisional assessment; assessments are sent to applicants requesting a revised proposal
- 2x “Negative” (after submission of a revised proposal) → recommendation to Director not to embed the research in APH

### General assessment

If a proposal has been accepted by a grant provider with an external peer review process only the plan of analysis and the feasibility of the proposal will be assessed by one member of the Science Committee. The reason for assessing the plan of analysis is that constructive changes can still be made to this plan. The feasibility of the proposal is assessed on the basis of the planning, staffing and budget.

Assessment:

- 1x “Positive, possibly with comments” → recommendation to Director to embed the research in APH
- 1x “Negative with comments” → this is viewed as a provisional assessment; assessments are sent to applicants requesting a revised proposal
- In case of doubt → second reviewer (member of Science Committee or external reviewer), reviewers reach consensus about recommendation
  - Consensus “Positive, possibly with comments” → recommendation to Director to embed the research in APH
  - Consensus “Negative with comments” → this is viewed as a provisional assessment; assessments are sent to applicants requesting a revised proposal
  - Consensus “Negative” (after submission of a revised proposal) → recommendation to Director not to embed the research in APH

## 2. Procedures for submission of program grant proposals

### *Background*

The Science Committee APH frequently receives proposals for which a so-called program grant has been awarded. Program grants are awarded for comprehensive research programs consisting of several research projects that are executed by several researchers. Experience has shown that proposals for research programs of this kind tend to be so general that the Science Committee is unable to adequately assess them, in particular in terms of the feasibility of their various subprojects (and the associated appointments). Such proposals can be submitted in two possible ways, as set out below.

### *Submitting a proposal for a full program grant*

Proposals for a full program grant are submitted to the Science Committee. The project should be described in sufficient detail in order to enable the reviewers to assess the methodological quality and especially the feasibility of the full research program. Subprojects are described more generally. In this case, a single Science Committee number (i.e. WC-number) number is assigned to the program grant. If this option is chosen, the applicants should indicate this on the form providing further information.

### *Submitting separate proposals for subprojects, included in the research program*

In this case, the proposal for the full research program will be assessed for relevance and suitability by the program directors. Subsequently, the separate research projects are submitted to the Science Committee, and the methodological quality and feasibility of the separate projects will be assessed. All separate projects will receive their own WC-number. If this option is chosen, the applicants should indicate this on the form providing further information. If the full program or one or more of the subprojects that have their own WC-number have already been approved, the applicants should also indicate this on the form providing further information.

The project database specifies which subprojects belong to which program grant (i.e. which WC-numbers form part of the same program). Applicants should clearly indicate on the form providing further details whether the research grant proposal submitted relates to a program grant or to a subproject of a program grant.

## 3. Ongoing research projects

The Director and the Science Committee take the view that ongoing projects will not be reviewed by the Science Committee. Exceptions can be made by the Director in consultation with the Science Committee. As long as patients have not been included and/or measurements have not yet been made, a project is considered not to have begun.

## 4. Internship project

Proposals for internships are assessed by the Science Committee only if they need to be submitted to the ethics committee, METc, in which case their proposal should include a notification letter by a science committee. Rather than determining whether or not to embed

a project in APH, the review will only assess the methodological quality and feasibility of the proposal. The proposal is reviewed by one member of the Science Committee. Internship proposals are not assessed for suitability and relevance by the program directors. Notification letters have to be assigned a Science Committee number. However, as internship projects do not need to be entered into the project database, the project can be marked immediately as “to be archived” after it has been assessed.

## **5. Doctoral plan of study for non-VU/VUmc employed junior researchers/PhD students**

### *External PhD students*

External PhD students are PhD students that are not, or will not be employed by APH, but who will obtain a PhD degree at APH. The PhD student is supervised by an APH researcher. As the doctoral plans of study of external PhD students often take shape at an advanced stage, it may be impossible to submit the research grant proposal to the Science Committee prior to the start of the project.

These projects can be submitted and assessed in either of two ways:

- The part of the project that has not yet started is submitted to the Science Committee as a project proposal and this project proposal is reviewed according to the standard procedure. The part of the project that has already been implemented will not be reviewed.
- The doctoral plan of study is submitted simultaneously to the Reading Committee and the Science Committee, as described in ‘Embedding PhD theses in APH’.

## **6. Doctoral plan of study for VUmc employed junior researchers/PhD students**

### *Embedding of approved PhD theses in APH*

Doctoral plans themselves should not be submitted to the Science Committee for assessment. The accompanying project plan or the research grant proposal can, however, be assessed.

Some doctoral plans of study do not take definite shape until they have reached the final stages of the project, in which case the research has been more or less completed. There is then little point in assessing its methodological quality and feasibility. It is then all the more crucial that program directors review the PhD for suitability. The Reading Committee is responsible for conducting a review based on scientific merit.

- The doctoral plan of study is submitted to the Science Committee during the final stage.
- The Science Committee will ask the program director to assess its suitability.

The Science Committee will ask the APH-VU/VUmc Director to recognize the PhD as an APH PhD.

## **Fixed review procedures**

### **7. Projects that have already been approved by another science committee**

Projects that have been approved by another science committee will be submitted to the Director. If the Director decides that the project can potentially be embedded in APH, the program directors will assess whether it fits into their research program and evaluate it on its relevance to APH's mission. If there are any doubts about the quality of the proposal, it will be reviewed by one member of the Science Committee.

### **8. Infrastructure projects**

Research proposals regarding the infrastructure of a research project will only be assessed for suitability and relevance for APH by the program directors. In this phase of the project, it will not be assessed on quality and feasibility.

In a later stage, after the data have been collected, separate subprojects can be submitted to the Science Committee to obtain an assessment on quality and feasibility. In this case, each subproject is assigned a separate WC-number and the project database will specify that the subprojects form part of the same infrastructure grant.

## Doubts as to whether the research project has a scientific basis

### *Rationale*

In some cases, it is not clear whether a project submitted to the Science Committee has a scientific basis.

It is, of course, primarily the responsibility of the project manager in question to determine whether a project has a scientific basis **before** submitting a proposal.

It is not the Science Committee's responsibility to judge whether a project has a scientific basis; the Science Committee assesses its methodological quality.

As it is the program directors' responsibility to evaluate a proposal on its relevance to APH's mission (namely to conduct scientific research), it would make sense for the program directors to assess the scientific basis of a project. The Secretary could play a role in this respect by sharing any doubts as to the scientific nature of a project with the program directors.

### *Procedure*

- Proposal is received by the Secretary of the Science Committee.
- The Secretary is not sure whether the proposal has a scientific basis and shares these doubts with the program directors.
- If the program directors determine that the project does have a scientific basis, the proposal is dealt with following the standard procedure.
- If the program directors determine that the project does not have a scientific basis, the Secretary of the Science Committee requests their arguments for this conclusion and puts the proposal, including the arguments, on the agenda of meeting of the Director and Board members.