Since 2013, the International Association for Vegetation Science every year allocates some money to support students and researchers in financial needs to participate at the IAVS Annual Symposium. This year, at the 62nd IAVS Symposium in Bremen, we met with awarded participants to explain where the travel award money come from, how the GSC committee selects whom to award money to, how we actually decide the amount awardees receive, and some details that are usually hidden between lines of the official documents. Here is the summary for those who may not have been able to join but are interested in how the thing works, and also for those who plan to apply for this travel award in future.

First, some statistics. In 2019, we had a nice budget of 30,000 EUR to pay for the travel awards. We received 71 valid applications from participants in 33 countries, mostly from graduate (master or PhD) students (35) and postdocs (18), but also from researchers and professors (9+3), an undergraduate student (1) and others (5). We were able to award 31 applicants (24 graduate students and 7 postdocs) with travel awards ranging from 290 to 1700 EUR (966 EUR on average). Awarded participants are from 15 countries, with the highest number from Brazil (9), Taiwan (3), South Africa (3), UK (2) and New Zealand (2). In addition to the travel awards funded by IAVS, the conference organiser, Prof Martin Diekmann, solicited funding of 6500 EUR from The Foundation Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung (Bremen, Germany), to enable six other applicants to receive financial support: two from Egypt, and one each from Ghana, Indonesia, Ukraine and Philippines. As a result, 37 out of the 71 original applicants received an award to travel to the IAVS Symposium in Bremen, resulting in a success rate of slightly over 50%. This information is not a secret: you can find it in the annual report of GSC committee, posted on IAVS website www.iavs.org, and reprinted in this issue of Bulletin (pages 19-20).

How does the selection work? The Global Sponsorship committee has currently six members from all continents who are all professional researchers in the field (http://iavs.org/Governance/Committees.aspx). After we collect all the applications, we first determine any conflict of interest: no committee member should evaluate participants in her/his lab or university, no previous students, colleagues or friends. We then divide the applicants randomly so that each applicant gets reviewed by at least three committee members. Each committee member will read the CV, motivation letter and abstract, and grade these between 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) in the category CV + motivation letter (why the applicant wants the money and what is her/his professional background) and Abstract (is it scientifically sound and does it fit the conference scope?). We also evaluate the professional stage of each participant, whether she/he is undergraduate or graduate student (grade 5), postdoc (3) or researcher and others (1). Evaluation in each of these three categories have weights (CV + motivation letter = 2/5 of the total evaluation, Abstract = 2/5, professional age = 1/5). So, for example, if you as an applicant get the score 3 and 4 in the category CV + motivation letter and Abstract, respectively, and you are PhD student (= 5), your overall mean is (3×2 + 4×2 + 5×1)/5 = 3.8. We then rank applicants by the overall score, forming the basis for selection. For each applicant, we calculate the estimated cost as a sum of the early bird registration fee in the appropriate category (student vs regular), estimated accommodation cost (in a single-bed budget hotel near the venue with private bathroom), and also the cost of the travel (we calculate the budget airfare from the country of residence to the conference with minimum stopovers). As you can see, we calculate most of the financial costs ourselves, to be as fair as possible (for example because the applicants requests for accommodation fee are often very variable, from a bed in an eight person dorm, to a four-star single person apartment). If you indicate that you secured another source of money, we subtract this amount from the award; this may appear to be a disadvantage (you get less money), but at the same time, that you got extra funding from elsewhere speaks in your favour to us, and may increase your evaluation in the CV + motivation letter category. It is important that you indicate clearly which category of expenses you require and which you don’t (e.g. you need only registration, but don’t need accommodation as you will be staying in a friend’s...
house, or don’t need travel because you will drive with a colleague). All money saved on an individual applicant will be used to fund the next in the ranking, so please be honest so that we can award as many applicants as possible. Also, if you eventually managed to secure funding from other sources (grant project, other foundation) and you don’t need the support (or part of it) anymore, please let the chair of GSC know as soon as possible, so the money can be used for others (we will not tolerate double reimbursing of the same cost from different sources). Another important point is that if you are from a high-income country, you receive only 70% of the estimated sum, to give an extra advantage to applicants from middle- and low-income countries. If you applied in previous years and obtained a travel award from GSC, you can still apply again (and we really support to you to do so!), but you will get only 70% of the funding (this applies if you have been awarded funding within the past two years, but not before). These “discounts” are not additive, so if you are a repeated awardee from a high-income country, you receive 70%. Finally, we count how much money we have, draw the line, and select “awarded” applicants (those who get money directly) and applicants “on the waiting list” (those who get money if some of the awarded applicants cannot use the funds). All money is reimbursed via the IAVS Business office after the conference is finished from the receipts submitted by the awardee. Usually, the registration fee will be paid directly by us to the conference organizers. Most importantly, read the instructions carefully and submit all documents as requested. It often happens that the applications are missing some of information requested, and we had to contact the applicants to fulfill her/his application, which can be time-consuming. As a consequence, the final decisions take a little longer to be announced.

Finally, where does the money come from? The main annual income of our Association is from the Journal of Vegetation Science and Applied Vegetation Science. Wiley, the publisher, shares with the Association the revenues generated by both journals from subscriptions, and the Association then uses this money for various activities. During the discussion at the meeting, we had a couple of questions related to travel grant applications and processing, and some questions also emerged from the email exchange with awarded (or not awarded) participants. Here we answer some of them.

If I specify that I need less money (e.g. I am willing to pay some money from my pocket), does it increase my odds to be selected? No, not really. The evaluation is mostly based on criteria not related to how much money you request (whether you are “cheap” or “expensive”). The only exception is perhaps if you indicate that you got extra money from other sources, which speaks in your favour as extra motivation. Indeed, paying money from your personal sources is a sign of solidarity, since part of the budget otherwise paid to you by Association can be used to fund more applicants.

Is it possible that IAVS will pay for my flight ticket in advance? No, unfortunately not. We can pay for the registration fee (you don’t need to pay for it), but not for accommodation and travel. We did so in the past, but we have had experience of an applicant who obtained money for the flight ticket but did not show up at the conference, and there was no way for the Association to get the money back. All this can happen for perfectly understandable reasons, but we need to make sure that the money we spend is spent wisely and fairly.

Is it possible to make the process of selection more transparent? We try this (this is also the reason for this article), but of course, every time there will be some detail which we did not foresee. Please, read the instructions published on the award website of the Annual Symposium. You may also read some of the old GSC reports at the www.iavs.org reprinted in older Bulletin issues, to get an idea of how the process works. If in doubt, contact the GSC chair with further questions.

Would it be possible to give less money to each applicant in order to support more applicants? Some associations do this (e.g. International Biogeography Society supports a flat fee of 500 USD to all selected applicants). We discussed this also at the meeting but concluded that this is perhaps not the way to go. The reason is that for some applicants the flat fee would not be enough to participate at the symposium at all, and they may not be able to come even if they get the award; in contrast, for some others it may be more than enough to go. We still need to keep in place some mechanisms to differentiate the applicants, e.g. if you are a student living in Germany and travelling to the conference in Germany by train, or you are early career researcher from Africa without a budget and travelling by plane. This is why we spend quite some time on evaluating each applicant and making selection criteria as transparent as possible, and we think this is the best approach at the moment.

It’s the first time for me to travel for such a meeting, can you please book my accommodation and pick me up at the airport? Sorry, but the committee members are unable to provide such services. We process the applications and make sure that the rules are fair and applied correctly, but we are not able to provide any technical support for the awarded applicants (some of us may not even be present at the symposium that year). For accommodation, you may contact local organisers, who may be able to help you (there are usually some accommodation options provided). For travel assistance, you need to organise this yourself or seek the assistance of a travel agency.
Young scientists working group in Bremen, Germany, July 2019.