

Physics and Astronomy Retreat 2026

Discussion on Research and Hiring Strategy 2026-2031

Draft version 27/03/2026

Introduction

We foresee to have (structurally) financial room in our budget to hire **3 assistant professors in 2027** (in addition to the 2 new ARCNL PIs which are being hired now).

This financial room arises from a **combination of multiple internal and external developments**, from a better-than-expected performance in our grant acquisition efforts to changes in our permanent scientific staff formation and to new sources of income identified recently. This estimate for our multi-year budget considers all known developments up to and including 2031.

We would therefore like to use the Retreat to have a bottom-up discussion on our strategic research priorities for 2026-2031 and identify profiles that would be a good match to strengthen this strategy. We would also like to discuss together what is the most efficient and fairer way to recruit these new colleagues.

Boundary conditions

- Our research strategy needs to carefully consider:
 - the VU *Instellingsplan 2026-2031*,
 - the multi-year strategic plan 2026-2031 of the Faculty of Science,
 - the recommendations of the SEP Research Assessment 2017-2024,
 - important scientific policy documents such as the new Dutch Physics Council (DPC) Vision Document, the Wennink report, and the NL National Technology Strategy.
- Scientific excellence, academic leadership, growth potential, and matching with our research strategy, educational activities, and valorisation efforts should be the decisive considerations in defining the profiles of these three new hires.
- Inter-section (or inter-department) research collaborations are to be encouraged
- For research and impact profiles: on average, 70% of PI salary needs to be “earned back” from research and impact activities. This constraint should be taken into account when writing the profiles.
- Education-focused profiles can also be considered in the discussion, provided their marked added value and strong embedding with our education, research, and valorisation portfolio can be justified.
- Connection and synergies with our partners at ARCNL, Nikhef, AMOLF, UvA-IoP, UT, AUMC may be considered, especially when opening now new possibilities for research funding and impactful research lines.
- We expect to be able to provide some form of start-up packages to the 3 new PIs (current estimate: 2 postdoc-years + investment money for each new hire).

How to organise the discussions

We propose to organise the discussions in the retreat in the following way:

- **Thursday afternoon** (1st day of the retreat): defining our strategic research agenda.
- We start with **short presentations** to make sure all PIs are aware of important policy documents that we should consider when discussing our strategy, including:
 - Dutch Physics Council Vision (Matz/Kjeld)
 - VU *instellingsplan* and Beta MJP (Juan)
 - National Technology Strategy and Wennick report (Erwin)
- Subsequently, PIs (individually or in groups) will make **short pitches** (5 min) motivating possible new research directions for our department (or extensions of existing ones).
- We will discuss these pitches in small groups and then report back to the whole group. We will finish the day with a poll to identify which topics are considered as most relevant.
- **Friday morning** (2nd day of the retreat): discussion on profiles of possible new PIs, at the light of the research strategy discussion of the previous day.
- Every PI (or group of PIs) is welcome to **pitch (5 min) scientific profiles** of possible new PIs subject to the boundary conditions described above.
- We would like these pitches to be as **concrete and specific** as possible e.g. ideally with names of people (at all career stages) which match with the profiles being proposed (say we would like to hire someone like Prof. Smith but at the UD level).
- Proponents should also motivate why we as department have a good chance to attract excellent researchers to join us in this specific topic.
- We will discuss the pitches in breakout sessions, then we vote and identify which profiles are preferred and have some level of consensus.
- PIs can **vote for multiple profiles and topics**: expressing our preferences does not need to be exclusive.
- **Friday afternoon: discussion on the hiring procedure.**
- We will discuss how to carry out the hiring (e.g. 3 different BACs versus a single super-BAC, other options?), how do we ensure we have enough strong applicants (maximal use of our networks? Scouting? Targeting specific researchers?) and how to ensure that the largest possible number of colleagues can provide feedback on the short-listed applicants.
- We would also like to ask the DEI Committee to prepare a short presentation on best practices for unbiased and fair hiring, and how to take into account diversity (in all its variants) along the process.
- Note that, if successful, this procedure could represent the blueprint for other future hires.

Next steps

- Consultation round within all Physics staff (offline).
- Discussion and final decision about these plans at **staff lunch of April 14th 2026**.

- Before the retreat: PIs prepare pitches on both topics and profiles.
- After the retreat: MT collects feedback and converges on the preferred profiles.
- Vacancy texts could be out before the end of 2026, targeting hires **starting some time in 2027**.
- Beyond 2027, we will yearly assess the financial capabilities of our department and if there is room for new hires discuss with the staff in the same way that we will do at the retreat.

DRAFT