

Early career panel: Grant applications

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Panel members: Professor Jakub Bijak, University of Southampton; Professor Jane Falkingham, University of Southampton; Professor Hill Kulu, University of St Andrews; Professor Melinda Mills, University of Oxford

Chair: Dr Julia Mikolai, University of St Andrews

Following on from a really useful, well-attended panel session for early career researchers on the grant application process, we have compiled some notes and tips incorporating the panel members' extensive experience as proposal writers and reviewers.

Professor Melinda Mills condensed her advice down to the 'FOUR Rs', and later on in the discussion the wider panel added two more. We have therefore found it useful to group the advice discussed in the room under these broad headings, with thanks to Professor Mills for the concept.

Rejection

This is something that happens a lot, but the failures are not often widely talked about. They are, however, an important part of the applications process. Don't take it personally, it is the norm, just make sure you do something constructive with it.

Resilience

Those who apply for funding, get funding. It is vital to keep applying, keeping in mind that you won't get them all. The people that, after rejection, keep trying, get the grants. Be passionate and play to your strengths, particularly your expertise coming out of your PhD.

Revision

Keep rewriting and developing your proposal. Take your time, be vulnerable, don't just accept 'nice' comments, and allow people to challenge you. Ensure you leave plenty of time to compile and complete your proposal, particularly if working with international colleagues.

Reviewer

Think about how the reviewers have to grade the proposals. Find out who has been on the committee, and discover any inside knowledge on the process. Know your funder and what they want, and know the call. Most funders have extensive guidance resources and FAQs on their websites. USE THESE. The bottom line is that your bid has to answer the specification, so it is your job to convince the panel that you have the answer they are looking for, and you are the right person to do it. You should be clear in the first paragraph about your research aims, and strive to pre-empt any questions reviewers and panellists might have. Make it obvious why they should fund you!

Risk

Reviewers are looking for innovative proposals that incorporate an element of scientific risk; consider whether what you are planning to do will bring significant change to your field. Capture a reviewer's interest by presenting something novel, and create some urgency for what you want funded. Scientific progress is, after all, about risk-taking.

Recycle

Time spent writing proposals is not time wasted, even if rejected. The work can be used as the basis for future proposals. Be careful, though, when changing funders – as in ‘Reviewers’ above, ensure that if you recycle elsewhere, you still do your homework on the funding body and its reviewers. Try to work with senior colleagues on writing proposals and learning the process, collaborate on grants where you are not PI, and be open to invitations.

Common mistakes

- 1) A proposal not tailored to the call.
- 2) A proposal not professionally prepared (typos, fonts etc.). This looks sloppy and introduces doubt into a reviewer’s mind - don’t give them any excuses to disregard your proposal.
- 3) Quickly submitted, low quality work – you risk your reputation.
- 4) Overplaying your strengths with hyperbolic language - avoid clichés and jargon.
- 5) Overuse of technical or specific language. This is where it helps to know the type of panel and reviewers you are submitting to. They are usually a mixed group who may not have an in-depth knowledge of your area of research, so write in a way that doesn’t assume prior knowledge of the subject. Where possible, give your proposal to a colleague from a completely different field to check if it’s understandable.
- 6) Work that hasn’t been planned properly with obvious inconsistencies or repetition throughout.
- 7) Including literature reviews or feasibility analyses. It should transpire from the proposal that, to some extent, this work has already been undertaken, you are well read, you know where the gaps are, and that your aim is to fill these gaps. Having recently done a PhD, you are in a good position to show this.
- 8) Allowing too much feedback. While some feedback is vital, ensure you maintain ownership of your work and your conviction so that you don’t lose your voice. Also be wary of circulating your work too widely, keep your feedback circle limited.
- 9) Limiting yourself to a certain funding bodies. Think outside of the box for the funders you apply to. Don’t just focus on one. You might be surprised how many funders look for a social sciences element in their calls. Scan as many calls and funding bodies as you can, including government bodies, local authorities and commercial companies, because there is demand for expertise everywhere that often goes unmet.
- 10) Unclear invitations to collaborators. Ensure you send a concise, succinct invitation that will persuade a collaborator to join your team. Collaborators are often more experienced, very busy and will not be in a position to take on projects without confidence in you that you can

successfully manage the work. It is your job to convince them that you are capable of delivering, that you know what your value added is, and have thought about activities for impact, so consider sending them a summary of your case for support for this purpose. If you are planning to collaborate with a non-academic person / organisation, ensure you outline what's in it for them.

Remember

Reviewers do know what it's like to be at the start of your career, and will be sympathetic to that. They are all volunteers, and want to contribute and foster the research careers of the next generation. Keep applying and don't be discouraged!

Resources

UKRI funding opportunities, including links to Research Council funding opportunities
<https://www.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/>

Wellcome Trust
<https://wellcome.ac.uk/funding>

Leverhulme Trust
<https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/schemes-at-a-glance>

UKCDR info on major global development funding programmes
<https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/funding-landscape/major-funding-programmes/>

The British Academy
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities>

The Royal Society
<https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/>

Early Career Researchers Central
<https://ecrcentral.org/fundings>

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