

How to bid for funding



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HOW DO I FIND FUNDING FOR ...?

One of the questions we are most often asked in the research office at Lincoln is how to find funding for *x*, where '*x*' is everything from travel for an overseas conference to a bursary for a postgraduate student coming to the end of their studies. (Both of these things are notoriously difficult to get, by the way, especially at short notice!) What most people don't realise, particularly when starting a research career, is that *finding* funding is often the easy part. A far more challenging question is 'How do I write a good funding bid?'

GRANT DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS AT LINCOLN

This latter question has been the focus of a series of popular monthly grant development workshops which the research office has been running at the University of Lincoln since autumn 2009. In these day-long events for four to eight staff we analyse examples of previously submitted bids – successful and unsuccessful – as well as carrying out mock reviews of participants' outline bids. The aim is to give potential applicants a deeper understanding of the process of reviewing and grading grant proposals in order to inform their own future bids.

It's surprising how effective this approach has been. The events have proved so popular – and demand so high – that we are now arranging one every other week. Some examples of feedback received so far are: 'Looking at other funding bids was extremely useful'; 'Will write future bids using what I've learned today'; and 'I can now take account of the sort of criteria funders apply'.

The rest of this article sets out some of the key tips and insights which have arisen from discussions in these workshops,^{1,2} as well as from the day-to-day experience of reading and commenting on funding bids from a range of academic disciplines.

Getting started is always one of the hardest steps in any process. There are opportunities available for new and emerging researchers, but sometimes the wisest course of action is to start small. This may mean applying for modest sums of money to fund short 'pilot' projects to explore initial ideas or to finish off a piece of research. Securing any amount of funding increases your chances when applying for more in future, because it demonstrates to potential funders that you can successfully manage a budget and complete a research project. It is also possible to build up a 'patchwork' of small funding grants to support larger projects.

Collaboration with colleagues is also essential at any point in your career, but particularly in the early stages. It can be as straightforward as finding out who is getting funding in your field and asking to work with them on a project. If you can offer them something in return – such as doing the administrative legwork on the funding bid – they are more likely to say yes. Conferences and other events also present good opportunities to engage with academic colleagues and discuss initial ideas for bids. Moreover, collaborating with more experienced colleagues will enable you to start bidding for larger grants at an earlier stage.

Paul Stainthorp, electronic resources librarian at the University of Lincoln, recently took part in a JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee)-funded project, MOSAIC (Making Our Shared Activity Information Count). The project leaders, the University of Huddersfield, invited several HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) – including Lincoln – to contribute library usage data which was aggregated, anonymised and analysed for trends in borrowing across subject areas. This information could then be used to make book recommendations to library users and to identify high-demand disciplines or items. Although the funding for Lincoln's role in the project was modest, it has led to some innovative uses of the data, and plans are in place to follow up with another bid in which Paul and the university will take a more central role.

WHAT DOES THE FUNDER WANT TO FUND?

Perhaps the most important point to get across in any training event or article on research funding is that an applicant must understand what the funder wants to fund.

Every funder has a certain remit, both generally and for particular funding calls. Another way of looking at this is that not all funders will fund the same kind of projects. This remit is informed by the funder's own strategic mission and objectives, which are, in turn, informed by the funder's relationship with its own funding body, whether that is the government (in the case of research councils) or a particular industry (in the case of Microsoft and Google, who invest selectively in funding ICT research and development). Familiarising yourself with this is critical, because your research project will only be funded if it directly addresses the funder's remit. To put it bluntly, your research won't be funded for its own sake but only if it helps the funder to meet its targets and achieve its objectives.

For example, JISC prominently displays its funding remit on its website.³ The programmes it funds 'support and innovate the use of ICT in education and research' and, specifically, the e-content strand seeks to 'enhance existing digital content to ... build a mass of *useable and relevant* content' (my emphasis). This last section is important because increasingly JISC and many other funders want to know how the work they fund is both sustainable and influential in the wider world. Their draft strategy (2010–2012) further emphasises this idea, focusing in particular on how effective funding of ICT can lead to efficiencies in light of the current financial crisis. Acknowledging and addressing these issues is therefore likely to strengthen any funding bid to JISC because it highlights that your bid will be directly or indirectly helping them to achieve their overall aims.

IMPACT

The notion of 'impact' in research funding is controversial,^{4,5} but it is common today for most funders to ask for at least a summary of non-academic impact and, for European Commission funding, it makes up a third of the overall mark for collaborative research projects.⁶ The benefit does not have to be purely economic; impact can also be social, for example through influencing policy or improving public awareness of a particular issue as part of a project. Part of the remit of JISC's Greening ICT programme is to reduce the carbon footprint of ICT across the higher education sector, but a funded project may raise awareness of the energy requirements and carbon emissions of ICT use through a YouTube video.

FOLLOW THE RULES

Most funding opportunities are accompanied by guidelines specifying the format and layout of the bid, including such apparently trivial details as:

- the maximum length of a section or the whole document
- font sizes
- the font itself
- margins
- line spacing
- the presentation of project costs
- the kinds of costs you can bid for.

Although these rules might seem pointlessly precise, you should familiarise yourself with them at an early stage and make sure you follow them.

All formatting guidelines are there for a reason, often because multiple photocopies of the bid document must be made for reviewers. Bids are regularly returned for amendment – or rejected outright – on the basis of incorrect font size or exceeding page limits. Similarly, where a bid includes ineligible (or unjustified) costs, those costs will either not be funded or the bid may be downgraded or rejected because of them.

MAKE THE REVIEWER'S LIFE EASY

Another way to make life easier for reviewers is to use the suggested headings in the guidance notes, such as 'research background', 'track record', 'lay summary'. These headings generally match the review criteria, which are also often published and which you should read thoroughly. If this sounds obvious, bear in mind that reviewers are busy people (just like you), often reading a pile of 10–20 bids on a train journey after a meeting. If your bid does not follow the headings laid out in the guidelines – and if you do not address each and every one of the review criteria – it will make the bid more difficult to review, and may predispose the reviewer to give it a lower mark.

The bottom line is that a funding bid is more of a sales pitch than a passive presentation of a research idea. Present your arguments confidently and concisely, and remember to include detailed information on targets, objectives and deliverables in your research. The aim is to give the reviewer the impression that you have a clearly defined programme of activity which directly addresses the funding criteria.

Review panels often work by identifying obvious weaknesses and excluding bids that do not meet explicit criteria. Any shortcomings or errors, including in the presentation of your bid, will reduce its chances of success. For this reason it is essential to invite critical comments from your colleagues well before the deadline to give yourself the opportunity to redraft and improve the bid prior to submission.

REUSE, REMIX, RECYCLE

It is a harsh fact that bidding for funding is highly competitive and the majority of bids are not funded: success rates across funders and schemes vary hugely, but are around 15-20 per cent on average. One difference between a highly successful researcher and a less successful one is the ability (and the willingness) to reflect on reviewers' comments and resubmit applications. A bid may require reworking and resubmitting one or more times to achieve success. If you don't succeed the first time, use the feedback as an opportunity to enhance the bid and resubmit in the next round. Apart from the principles outlined here, the key to a good funding bid is perseverance and determination.

REFERENCES

- 1 A. Hunter, 'Grant development workshop', presentation given to staff at University of Lincoln, 2009 (unpublished)
- 2 M. Pickard, 'The art of fellowships', presentation given to staff at University of Lincoln, 2009 (unpublished)
- 3 See the JISC website at <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes.aspx> [accessed 11/03/2010]
- 4 Z. Corbyn, 'Thousands of academics call for impact to be axed', *Times Higher Education* (3 December 2009), available at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=409395> [accessed 02/02/2010]
- 5 J. Shepherd, 'Humanities research threatened by demands for 'economic impact'', *The Guardian* (13 October 2009), available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/oct/13/research-funding-economic-impact-humanities> [accessed 02/02/2010]
- 6 For example, see the 'Guide for Applicants' for the ICT Work Programme in Framework, Programme 7 (pp30-1), available at http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/dc/index.cfm?fuseaction=UserSite.CooperationDetailsCallPage&call_id=297

[accessed 02/02/2010]. 'Impact' is worth 5 marks, as is 'Implementation' (i.e. how the project is managed), leaving just 5 marks for what the EC calls 'Scientific and Technological Quality' or for the research itself. This is common across many EC funding programmes.