Top Tips for Grant-Writing for Early Stage Researchers

Essential Elements of a Successful Application

Tuesday 28 January 2020

Overview of presentation

- Me and my role
- Applying for a research grant
  - Practicalities
  - The application
  - Presentation/grantsmanship and assessment criteria
- Questions

Me and my role

- Office of the Vice-Provost (Research), UCL (University College London), UK
- Director of Research Facilitation, Coordination & Planning
- Research Facilitation and Coordination team: Arts & Humanities, Social & Historical Sciences, Laws, School of Slavonic and East European Studies and Institute of Education
- UCL wide

Research Facilitation and Coordination: Three teams

- Institute of Education and SLASH (Arts & Humanities, Laws, Social & Historical Sciences and School of Slavonic & East European Studies)
- BEAMS (Bartlett, Engineering and Mathematical & Physical Sciences)
- SLMS (Brain Sciences, Life Sciences, Medical Sciences and Population Health Sciences)

What we do

- Meet with academic staff at all career stages (lecturer and above) to discuss research ideas/plans & explore potential ways of funding them, advise on schemes
- Provide detailed constructive feedback on how to strengthen grant applications
- Letters of support to be signed by Vice-Provost (Research)
- Feedback on responses to peer reviewers
- Participate in mock interview panels
- Coordinate internal processes for schemes with institutional cap on numbers or when required to manage demand
- Funding opportunities bulletins
- Grants workshops & ‘drop-ins’/‘surgeries’
- Research initiatives (strategic)
- Collaborative Social Science Domain

My background

- MA, PhD
- 3 years as a lecturer
- 7 years working for a funder
  - Managed more than 15 funding schemes
  - More than thousand research grant applications
  - Thousands of referee reports
  - Funding recommendations on a couple of hundred applications
  - Funding Committee meetings

Practicalities

- What to have
- What to find out
- What to consider
- What to know

Before applying for a research grant

- Project
- Funding required – how much to you need/want
- Funder's remit
- Schemes and eligibility
- Host institution/sponsor/mentor
- Competitive/right time to apply
  - Open account with funder
  - Help notes/instructions
  - Scheme notes/guidance for applicants
  - FAQs
  - Guidance for reviewers

Team

- Check guidelines (funder; scheme)
- PI (Principal Investigator, Principal Applicant)
- Co-I (Co-Investigator, Co-Applicant)
- RA (Research Assistant)
- PhD student
- Mentor/sponsor
- Collaborator
- Project partner
- Consultant
- Advisory board/stakeholder committee

Application timetable

- Tell your department you wish to apply
  - Teaching relief (if, say, Lecturer)
  - Space and facilities
  - Other colleagues applying
- Internal selection process (departmental, faculty, institutional)
  - Research committee
  - Demand management/cap on number of applications
- Institutional deadlines – the funder's deadline is highly unlikely to be your only or final deadline
  - Colleagues (costing, feedback etc)
  - Statement/Letter of support (HoD, mentor/sponsor, Dean, Vice-Provost (Research))
  - Submission process (department/faculty, institutional)
- Staff availability
- Recruitment
- Ethics approval
- Earliest and latest start date

Funder's procedures

- Outline/full application
- Eligibility check
  - Applicant AND application
- Peer review
- (PI response to referee reports)
- (Interview)
- (Need to attend meeting/event)
- Panel meeting
- Funding decision
- If successful, reporting back to funder
- Assessment of report(s)

What makes a good application?

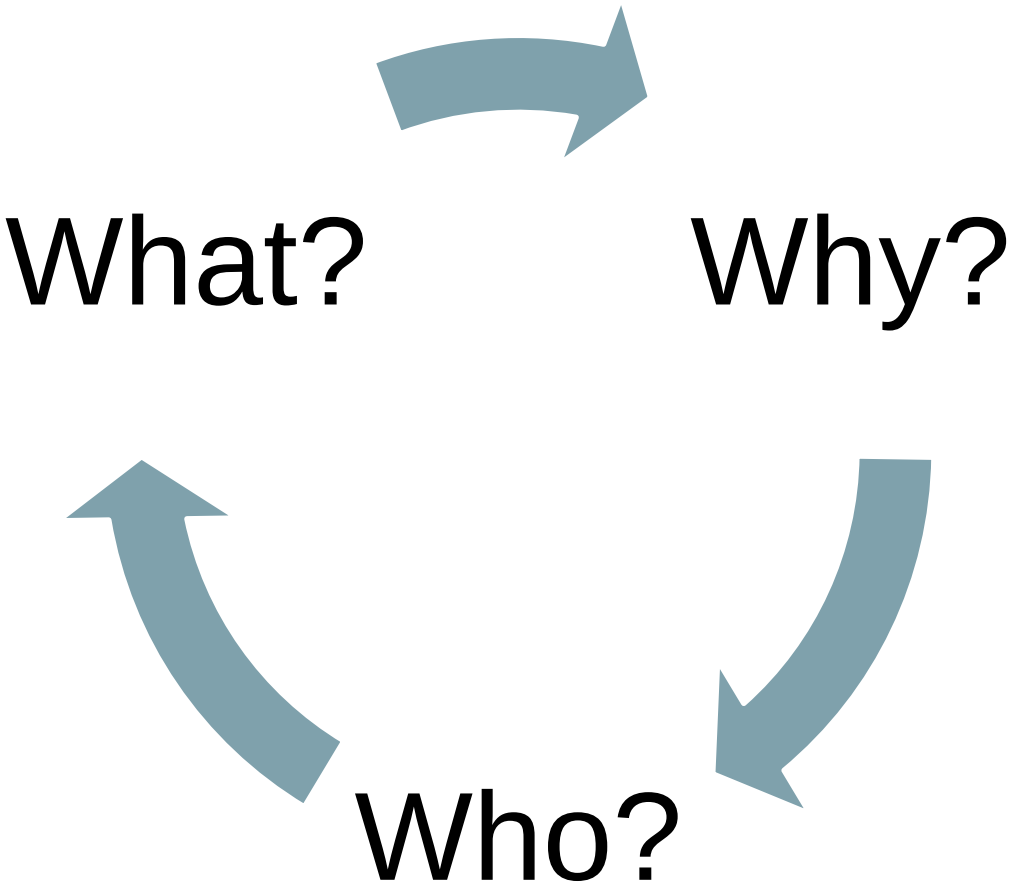
- Five key criteria
  - The applicant(s)
  - Research question/idea
  - Preliminary research and project details
  - Presentation/grantsmanship
  - Fit to funder, including funder's expectations, and scheme

Postdoctoral Fellowships

- What funders are looking for:
  - Research potential of applicant (proven)
    - Get published!
  - Excellent idea
  - Not a continuation of PhD or current postdoctoral research (but it depends on funder/scheme)
  - Institution
  - Sponsor/mentor
  - Quality of application

The application

- What do you want to do?
- Why do you want to do it?
- Who are interested?


What?
Why?
Who?

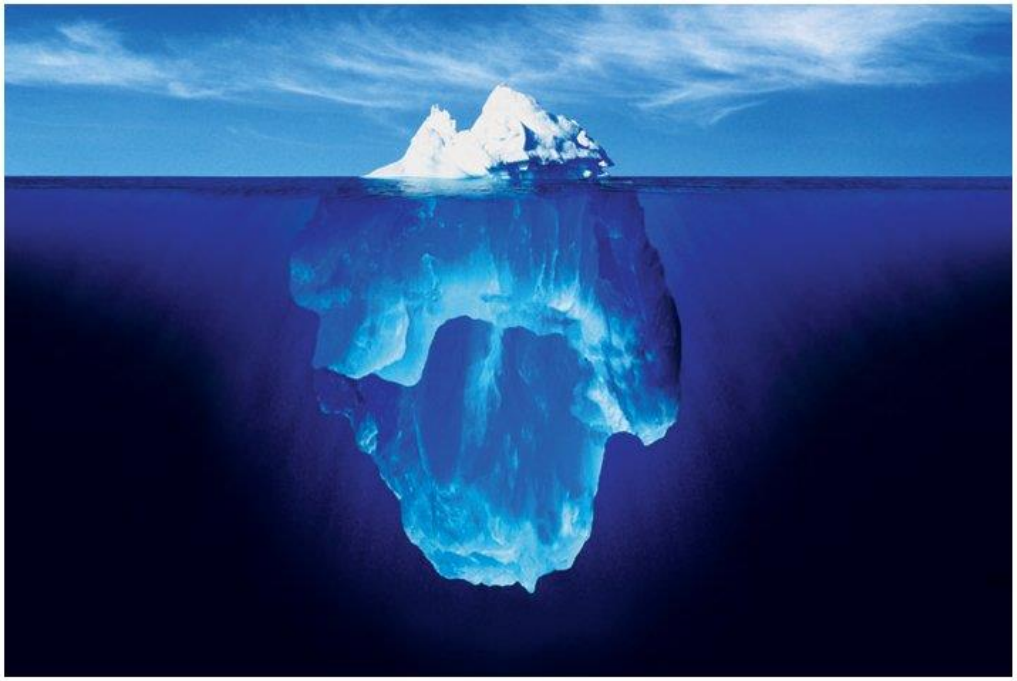
The application form

- Complete sections – do not ‘copy and paste’
- Reverse chronological order unless the guidelines tell you otherwise (CV: qualifications, appointments, publications)
- Attachments – required/optional, format etc
- Read and follow the funder’s guidelines

How to structure the case for support

The funder may ask you to structure your application in a different way but the key messages on the following slides still apply!

What to include in the case for support



How to structure a case for support

- Research project and context
  - 25-30%
- Methodology, methods, sources and analysis
  - 60-65%
- Dissemination: Outputs, audiences and impact
  - 10%

Research project and context

- What is the project about?
- Research questions(s)/hypothesis
  - Not a ‘shopping list’
- Aim(s) and objectives
- Existing scholarship/field of inquiry
  - Work done by other scholars but also by yourself
  - Who are key authors? What are key points?
  - Engage and discuss – make significant scholarly contribution
- Why is the project important?

Methodology, methods, sources and analysis

- Methodology – more than methods – your intellectual/theoretical framework and overall approach
- Methods – what will actually do
- Pick methodology/methodologies and methods clearly suited to answering research question(s)/testing your hypothesis
- Justify/explain choice of methodology/methodologies and methods
- Think carefully about inter-/multi-/cross-disciplinary work – need to be clear about value, how will work in practice

Methodology, methods, sources and analysis

- Justify case studies/comparisons to be made
- Explain choice of sources and analysis
- Data collection, ethics and data protection
- Experience and specialist skills
- Pilot/feasibility study?
- Technical stuff
- Project management
- Timetable with milestones

Project management

- Single researcher (Principal Investigator/Principal Applicant)
- Describe team, roles and responsibilities
- Mentor/sponsor
- Advisory board/stakeholder committee
- Mechanisms for communicating, sharing data/ material etc – frequency of meetings, what will happen in them, electronic forms of communication
- Work plan, work packages/research strands, Gantt chart, timetable with milestones
  - Number of work packages: WP1: title of WP (month x-y) (done by z and t (e.g. PI, RA2))
- May be part of 'Methodology, methods, sources and analysis' (depending on funder)

Dissemination: Outputs, audiences and impact

- What are the outputs, how many and who will write them (eg RA's career development)?
- How and where will the research findings be disseminated? E.g.
  - Number of peer-reviewed articles – journals
  - Book – publisher
  - Conference presentations
- Who are interested and why?
- What will the impact of the research and its findings be (academic, non-academic)?

Impact

- Read funder's guidelines and scheme notes
- Different kinds of impact
  - Academic/scholarly impact
  - Impact on career/career development
  - Wider impact: economic, educational, societal, policy, cultural etc
- Think about short-/medium-/long-term impact
- Key question: So what?
- Time commitment (timetable, Gannt chart)
- Costs

Pathways to Impact (non-academic)

Key questions:

- Who will benefit?
- How will they benefit?
- What will you do to make sure they benefit?

Possible activities:

Publications (e.g. policy briefs, professional magazines), talks, workshops, websites, training, secondments, schools, plays, exhibitions, ‘user’ involvement in project design from outset, advisory/stakeholder committee etc

Top tips:

- Make it project-specific, not generalised
- Show clear understanding of contexts & needs of users
- Tailor activities to users’ needs; evidence of appropriateness?
- Engagement rather than dissemination
- Include evidence of existing engagement with users, key contacts & collaborations on which will build, prior experience
- Outline planning & management of activities, incl timing, who will do what, resources, budget
- Work package about wider impact
- Evaluation - have achieved benefits/impacts?

Presentation/grantsmanship

- Why should your application be funded?
- Convince peer reviewers and funding panel
- Writing ‘I’ is fine, especially in applications for personal awards (a team: ‘we’ or ‘my team and I’)
- Positive and confident statements (but not: ‘I am the leading researcher in my field’)
- Show your passion for the project

How to say the same thing in a different way

Instead of

- The project will study …
- The project will fill a gap ….
- It is hoped that the project will …
- The proposed project …

Why not write

- I will study …
- I will undertake the first ever study of …. or I will be the first to …
- I will ….
- My project …

Presentation/grantsmanship

- Keep the audiences in mind
  - Peer reviewers
  - Panel members
  - Funder
- State the obvious
- Read information and follow guidelines
- Be kind to the readers (some repetition fine, signposting, ‘to the point’)
- No jargon
- No typos – sloppy application = sloppy research
- Feedback on drafts – peers, research support staff, friends & family – internal review process
- Email address!

Typical key assessment criteria

- Calibre of applicant/team and track record
- Importance of project, dissemination and impact
- Skills required to carry out the project
- Appropriate institution (eg research expertise, ‘infrastucture’)
- Institutional support (if required)
- Fit to funder and scheme
- Quality of application/grantsmanship (including methodology/methods & feasibility)
- Value for money

Thank you