BBSRC Future Leader Fellowships
Advice for submitting a competitive application

This document has been developed to provide additional guidance on applying to BBSRC Fellowship schemes, in particular the Future Leader Fellowship. It aims to help applicants and Heads of Division / Department to ensure that applications are as competitive as possible.

Overarching purpose of the fellowships schemes
BBSRC regards their fellowship schemes as a focused commitment to developing a cohort of internationally leading bioscience researchers who will be major thinkers and leaders in bioscience research in UK universities and research institutes. BBSRC is committed to providing a supply of highly-skilled, outstanding researchers who are committed, long-term, to fundamental bioscience research and the strategic areas of which BBSRC is the major UK funder, such as plant biology, crop science, industrial biotechnology etc. See http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/about/vision-mission-strategy/vision/.

Purpose of Future Leader Fellowship scheme
- The Future Leader Fellowship (FLF) is aimed at very early career researchers to undertake independent research and gain leadership skills within a supportive research environment
- Recipients are the topmost rising stars who already (i.e. in their application) demonstrate high potential to become future leaders
- Applications may be from any area within BBSRC’s remit. Crucially, the scheme is looking for early career bioscientists and biotechnologists i.e. those who intend to continue long-term as leaders in bioscience and biotechnology, with a clear commitment to these areas.

Purpose of David Phillips Fellowship scheme
- The David Phillips Fellowship (DPF) is aimed at junior researchers seeking to establish their first independent research group
- Applicants must demonstrate leading scientific outputs; leadership qualities and a strong upward trajectory
- Again, BBSRC are looking to fund future international leaders in bioscience and biotechnology.

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1 This is in addition to the full scheme guidance available on the BBSRC website
2 Eligible researchers will be in the final stages of their PhD or hold a PhD with no more than 5 years postdoctoral experience.

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Aspects of a strong FLF application

This guidance is based on specific feedback from BBSRC on common reasons why previous Future Leader Fellowship applications from UCL have not been successful. UCL applicants and Heads of Department / Division should ensure that each of these considerations are met in any FLF applicant / application. This guidance is also generally relevant for DPF applications.

- **Candidate selection:**
  - Candidates must exhibit sufficient potential in their current track record to be considered as future independent research leaders
  - Division and Department Heads are encouraged to actively ensure that the highest calibre candidates are put forward to both the FLF and DPF schemes.

- **Internal peer review and grant writing:**
  - Divisions and Departments should ensure that applicants have access to adequate internal peer review mechanisms for their (early) career stage
  - Applicants should utilise a comprehensive resource of videos and slides from a BBSRC fellowships event held at UCL in 2016, which includes tips for success from BBSRC Fellowships team staff and a DPF awardee at UCL. Some general tips for success highlighted in the presentation are summarised in the next section.
  - Support for application review is also available from SLMS and BEAMS Research Facilitators.

- The Career Development Plan is an extremely important part of the application and it should be obvious to reviewers that this has been well thought through. Particular issues that applicants should address in detail are:
  - Demonstrating a clear vision of the candidate’s long term career goals (applicants should note BBSRC’s wish to support the next leaders in bioscience, biotechnology etc), and importantly how the fellowship will enable them to advance their career toward these goals
  - Demonstrating how the fellowship will support them to gain the skills needed for subsequent positions.

- **Fellowship location:** Staying in the same location for the fellowship is fine (BBSRC report that over 50% of FLFs stay in the same place), but applicants need to clearly show what they have been doing to establish their independence prior to the application, and how this independence will be supported further by the fellowship.

- **Independence:**
  - For the FLF scheme, the research project must be sufficiently different from the sponsor/host laboratory’s work to enable the candidate to carve their own research niche and achieve independence.
  - The research project must be the candidate’s own idea, and this should come across clearly in the application.

- **Host institution support:** BBSRC expect to see a substantial demonstration of support for the fellow. The Head of Department letter should clearly describe what UCL is doing to help develop the fellow’s career. This does not have to be financial, and support for a fellow should be more than just lab/office space and a computer. Consider support such as mentorship, access to training, support networks, access to cutting edge research facilities/equipment etc.

- **Scientific case for support:** Aspects of the research proposal that have weakened previous applications, and thus should be given appropriate consideration, are:
- Contingencies: the research proposal should contain appropriate consideration of contingencies, especially where later research aims may be dependent on earlier ones.
- Over-ambition: ensure and demonstrate that the proposed research is achievable in the timeframe.
- Vagueness: sufficient detail, especially on methodologies, should be provided.
- Lack of clear outcomes: the research proposal should display a clear idea of the expected outcomes of each aim / research question and overall.

**Positive feedback to build on:** UCL is regularly recognised as being the best place to carry out the research proposed in FLF applications.

**General tips for success**

This section provides some additional **general guidance** on how to write a strong Future Leader Fellowship application. It includes highlights of BBSRC advice on what makes a good application (their full advice is available in the [fellowships event presentation](#)) plus general tips from experience of working on BBSRC and fellowship applications.

**Independence**

- **Do:** Candidates should make it clear how they have developed the research idea themselves, i.e. reference how the research idea originated from their previous work (or from / in combination with someone else’s work).
- **Do:** Candidates should demonstrate how they / the project will be independent e.g. through bringing / developing skills that are different from the host group; setting up independent collaborations; generating preliminary data.
- **Don’t:** propose a project that is just carrying on a current PI’s research.

**Leadership potential:** to be competitive candidates need to show evidence that they have the potential to become a future leader. Measures that demonstrate leadership potential include (but are not limited to): invitation to give a talk; poster prizes / other awards; collaborations; organisation of seminars etc.

**Research project: the bigger picture**

- **Do:** Candidates should convey their passion for their research, in particular by ensuring their research proposal is clear, detailed in terms of what will be done and how, and what will come out of it. A vague project proposal will not convince reviewers of the candidate’s ambition or ability.
- **Do:** Demonstrate how the project will complement the field, avoid competing with other groups, and what the long-term impact of the research will be.

**Use “I” not “we” for FLF applications:** This is a junior fellowship: the expectation is that the candidate will do most of the work. “We” can indicate a lack of independence in this setting.

**Remember that BBSRC fund research into normal biological mechanisms or physiology.** If a project has any form of disease focus it is unlikely to succeed with BBSRC.