Support for staff – advice on grant applications

Your department

You must inform your department that you want to submit an application. There should be an internal review process in place to help you submit a competitive application. There are likely to be departmental deadlines, e.g. for using pFACT (a costing tool), approval and sign off. For UCL submission processes, including timelines and services standard, read the UCL Procedures for Research Grant Applications. Your Departmental Administrator may be able to help you with costings.

School Research Facilitators

Research Facilitators have an academic background and have worked for funders for a number of years. They handle a large number of applications and have a good understanding of major funders and maintain good relations with them. They will help researchers who may not have worked together respond to a call and identify collaborators. They will meet you to discuss your research ideas and offer suggestions to maximise your chance of being successful, and can arrange mock interviews if required. If you are given the chance to respond to referee comments before a funding recommendation is made, they can read your response. Your application is treated as confidential and will not be discussed with anyone without your consent.

Contact your School Research Facilitator.

UCL Research Services – Pre-Award Administration

Your first contact is your department – please let them and the UCL Research Finance Unit know that you will be submitting an application well in advance. Their web pages provide advice on costing, submission process and application timelines. Departmental Research Finance Officers contact details are available from Pre-Award Contacts for Departments.

Your RFO will handle validation and submission of all applications – except those submitted under the European Framework programmes, which are dealt with by the UCL European Research & Innovation Office.

How to find funding opportunities

You can find funding opportunities from a wide range of sources, including EU, RCUK and third sector funding through UCL’s subscription to ResearchConnect. To access the site you will need to register – please email Jacob Sweiry <mailto:j.sweiry@ucl.ac.uk> to request access.

Once registered you will also be able to access other tools including PolicyFinder, GrantFinder and ResearchConnect, save your searches and set up alerts for yourself as well as for a group.
Watch a short video introduction to ResearchConnect
Download the ResearchConnect quick-start guide (pdf)

UCL subscribes to the UK Research Office <http://www.ukro.ac.uk/> which provides information about opportunities under the European framework programmes

Your School Research Facilitator produces regular funding opportunities bulletins and can help you identify opportunities.

The UCL European Research & Innovation Office can advise on opportunities under the European framework programmes

Visit funders’ websites and subscribe to their email alerts

Funders do not always use terminology consistently, so look at as many opportunities offered by the funder as possible. An example of the lack of a common ‘funders’ language’ is ‘fellowship’ which dependent on the funder/organisation can describe:

- A research leave award
- A personal award with funding for a project team
- A postdoctoral award for non-tenured researchers
- A visiting/travelling fellowship (travel grant)
- A non-salaried affiliation with an institution

Impact summaries and pathways to impact

Think about impact from the start: not just economic impact but also cultural, societal and policy impact

Examples of range of impacts
It may be helpful to think about short/medium/long term impact
Please see the funders’ websites and the guidance notes in Je-S or information about what your funder is looking for and want you to include
You may find the UCL Impact website with links to funders’ websites, case studies, impact summaries etc helpful

Key criteria

- The applicant(s) and their track record/potential
- Research question/idea
- Preliminary research and project details
- Presentation/grantsmanship
- Knowing the funder, including funder’s expectations, and applying under the right scheme

In other words

- Your application must be easily read and understood (read it out loud!)
• Clear and worthwhile research question
• ‘Do-able’: expertise, resources, time
• Convincing preliminary data/feasibility study
• Infrastructure for research in place
• Good collaborators
• Limitations of study design acknowledged and impact on robustness of findings discussed
• Make the assessors wish they had thought of it first!

Applying for a grant – Questions to ask yourself before you apply

• What do you want to do
• Why do you want to do it
• Who are the audiences
• There has to be a synergy between these questions and the ‘who’ should be embedded in the research question

Understanding your audience

• The panel members, external reviewers and the funder
• Read up on the funder – what do they fund? Who are their panel members and who are the likely external reviewers?
• Be clear. Do not assume any prior knowledge of your field of research as they may come from discipline other than yours. They may not be experts in your subject area and you should not expect them to be able to put two and two together but spell out what is obvious to you – it is up to you to convince them that you are the right person for the job

Aims and objectives

Many people use aims and objectives as synonyms. However, if asked to list your aims and objectives, the difference is:

Aims are the changes you want to achieve and are often called your vision, eg to improve women’s health. Your objectives are the activities you will do to achieve your aims, eg to distribute health leaflets

The application form and attachments

• Complete sections and take it seriously. Do not do a ‘copy and paste’ job even if sections/questions appear to be similar
• Read the funder’s guidelines and the help notes in the online application system.
• If in doubt, contact the funder
• Ensure you use the correct font, font size etc
• Do not exceed the word/page limits
• Check which attachments you should and can include
• Use reverse chronological order (CV, eg qualifications, appointments, publications) unless the funder’s guidelines tell you otherwise
Research Councils

A Pathways to Impact attachment is required by all Research Councils
Academic Beneficiaries – it is about academic beneficiaries only
Impact Summary – it is about non-academic beneficiaries only

The Case for Support (details of research project)

• The funder will often give you instructions on how to structure your
  Case for Support (this is the term used by the Research Councils;
  other funders may call it something else but it is the details of your
  research project). Make sure you read the instructions and follow them
• The title must be clear, accurate, telling (and should be in the Case for
  Support; do not expect the assessors to remember it; also reading a
  Case for Support without a title is like reading an article/book without
  one)

Summary

First and last; with the aims, it is the most important bit / sets impression!
Think of it as an ‘advert’

Background and aims: what and why

• Short list of key aims that match the summary and the study design
• Relevance of past / current research
• Rationale: novelty, excitement, importance, focussed, hypotheses-
driven but testable
• Study design and methods: how
• A study design capable of answering the question
• Detailed methods, strategy, explicit, power calculations
• Realistic time-frame
• Pilot data
• How will data be collected? Analysed?
• Expected outcomes
• Relevance
• Anticipate any problems that may arise and say how you will overcome
  them

Resources and justification

• Expertise
• Research staff
• Equipment
• Consumables, other costs
• Ethical approval
• Timetable and milestones
• Data sharing and management
If your funder does not give you any instructions, the following structure works very well in the social sciences and humanities (and is a good check-list even if your funder gives you instructions):

Research project and context (about 25-30% of the Case for Support)

• Title
• What is the project about
• Research questions(s)
• Aims and objectives
• Existing scholarship/field of inquiry
• Why your project is important

Methodology, sources and analysis (about 60-65%)

• Justify case studies/comparisons to be made (must also be mentioned in Research project and context)
• Explain choice of sources and analysis
• Data collection and ethics
• Highlight specialist skills
• Technical stuff, including ‘legacy’ of electronic resources/project website
• Copyright, IP
• Project management (roles and responsibilities - who will do what. It can also be mentioned earlier in the section if it makes more sense); supervision
• of research assistant; communication between project team; advisory/steering committee if applicable)
• Timetable with milestones

Outputs, audiences and impact (about 10%)

• What are the outputs
• How and where will your research findings be disseminated
• Who are interested and why
• What will the impact of your research and its findings be

Presentation/grantsmanship

• Writing a grant application is different from writing a paper – don’t leave your most significant information to the end. Use clear, confident language to demonstrate to funders and panel members why your application should be funded.
• Read the guidelines thoroughly and follow them – exceeding the word or page limit can result in your application being turned down.
• Keep your application clear and concise – make sure your argument is easy to follow, avoid jargon, cross-references and extensive lists of irrelevant
• references.
• Proofread your application for spelling mistakes. If possible, ask a colleague to read your application to make sure it’s easy to follow and understand.

Common mistakes and how to avoid them

• Ensure you’ve allowed enough time to prepare your application.
• Don’t over-promise – don’t present the panel with a shopping list of questions, or set out a proposal that cannot be delivered with the time, resources and expertise that you have.
• Is your proposal sufficiently detailed? Include sample size estimates, ensure your study design and methodology is clear and explain how your sources and analysis will support your investigation.
• Is your proposal novel – has it been done before? Is it relevant and generalizable to the wider world?
• Have you considered the ethical implications of your research?

Some solutions and tips

• Ask your friends/mentors/School Research Facilitator to read your proposal. If non-experts cannot understand what you want to do, why and how, the assessors are unlikely to understand it either
• Give it to an expert in the field to comment (an expert should be able to identify flaws in the methodology)
• If it becomes too complicated or long, stop - are you trying to do too much?
• Think about timing – why is this the right time: new methods; great preliminary data; new resource etc
• Always explain why you are doing what you propose – what is obvious to you is not always obvious to the assessors
• Repeat key statements – your proposal will only be discussed for a few minutes and you want the key points to come through clearly
• Offer to review grant applications for funding bodies

Right to reply to referee reports

• Use right to reply
• Engage with referee comments
• Do not be defensive
• Do not be aggressive if criticism is unfair/the referees have not understood what you want to do
• One more chance to convince the panel why your application should be funded
• Your reply may influence the funding decision

Reviewer/panel member comments you want to avoid
• ‘...the applicant has no prior experience of the techniques outlined and no preliminary data are proposed’
• ‘...the work described in this application is over-ambitious’
• ‘...I was unclear what they were trying to do’
• ‘...the list of objectives is too long to develop any one of them satisfactorily’
• ‘...the current proposal is under-specified: it leaves it all to your imagination’

Above all you want to avoid the 'so what?' response
• Set the tone
• Address your readers
• Feed them, guide them
• Explain the significance
• Identify pitfalls before the referees do
• Keep workload realistic

Assessment criteria

• Quality of applicant and track record
• Importance of project, dissemination and impact
• Skills required to carry out the project
• Appropriate institution
• Fit to funder and scheme
• Quality of application / grantsmanship
• Value for money

Some useful links

• The Art of Grantsmanship by Jacob Kraicer
• How Not to Kill a Grant Application
• Nature’s Guide to Mentors

NIH Videos on YouTube:

• NIH Peer Review Revealed
• NIH Tips for Applicants
• ESRC Guidance for Applicants