

Lancaster  
University



Research Services

*How to write a good proposal*

# Contents

Introduction.....	3
Thinking about the proposal .....	3
Creating a draft proposal (ESRC example).....	4
Costing and Pricing, and Justification for Resources.....	6
Creating a full proposal and electronic submission .....	7
Je-S application form sections .....	7
What happens next? .....	8

## Introduction

Applications to the main research funders such as AHRC, BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC, British Academy Leverhulme Trust etc. are broadly similar – these vary according to scheme but follow a very similar application and review process. The following information takes an *ESRC Standard Grant* application as a template but the information is also applicable to other funders.

## Thinking about the proposal

### *1. Allow yourself enough time*

Applying to Research Councils is a time-consuming process. Preparing a draft proposal and consulting on it, preparing the project costings and getting advice on these, as well as reading the regulations of the grants scheme to learn what you can apply for, are all time-consuming parts of the process of application.

Timing – generally takes 6 to 8 weeks to write, cost and get approval for proposal. 30 weeks for research council to review proposal and announce decision. Start date should be no earlier than 9 months after date of submission.

### *2. Discuss your proposal*

...with peer groups, colleagues, and with senior and more experienced researchers. If you have never sent in a proposal to the funder before try to get the advice of someone who has already been successful. Research Services have a library of successful bids you can use as an example of work that has been funded. Draw up an outline of the idea (one side A4) and consult with colleagues in the department and externally, mentors, friends etc. Report the idea to your Research Director and to Research Development Officers.

### *3. Study your funding source*

Identify a funding agency – use Research Connect, seek advice from colleagues and Research Services. Study the work programme of the funder in detail and note questions to follow up. Check previously funded projects e.g. use Gateway to Research for Research Councils, and study upcoming programmes, calls and deadlines. Research proposals should primarily be concerned with research processes, rather than outputs – how you will carry out the research - what you are going to do – is of more interest and carries more weight than the book, journal article, conference paper etc you will produce at the end.

3 key features that should always be addressed in order to be considered for funding:

- The proposal must define a series of research questions, issues or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its aims and objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions, issues or problems to be addressed.
- The proposal must specify a research context for the questions, issues or problems to be addressed. You must specify why it is important that these particular questions, issues or problems should be addressed; what other research is being or has been conducted in

this area; and what particular contribution this project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in this area.

- The proposal must specify the research methods for addressing and answering the research questions, issues or problems. You must state how, in the course of the research project, you will seek to answer the questions, address the issues or solve the problems. You should also explain the rationale for your chosen research methods and why you think they provide the most appropriate means by which to address the research questions, issues or problems.

#### *4. Read the rules*

...and the guidance notes attached to the application form which are designed to help you through the 'filling in' process. This is very important. Don't assume that you know the requirements because you have applied before as the guidance will change.

#### *5. Build your proposal writing team*

Convene a working group to discuss the outline idea. Consider roles and responsibilities – above all agree who is to co-ordinate the proposal (write it, take ownership of it, carry it forward...). Consider the composition of the team – internal and external members – the primary determinants must be reputation, track record and academic expertise – be tactical but be sure you can work with them. Varied skills are the most use when it comes to running the project.

#### *6. Consider Impact*

Who is going to benefit from the outcomes of the research? What difference is the research going to make to the well-being of society at large – individuals, organisations, nations? How can you demonstrate this impact? Note that Impact is very different from the simple dissemination of findings.

#### *7. Consider Originality and Outputs*

The idea needs to be striking, to build on existing research but to mark a clear step forward in the current state of knowledge. Think about the intended outputs in terms of what you want to write, exhibit, produce, host, contribute etc.

## Creating a draft proposal (ESRC example)

### *1. Structuring the proposal*

Try to structure the draft proposal using the sections the ESRC wants to see in their Case for Support. This should include (but is not limited to) the following:

- An **introduction** setting the aims and objectives of the study in context. This should briefly sketch the main work on which the research will draw, with references. Any relevant policy or practical background should also be included. A clear link must be made between the aims and objectives and the scope and theme of the call.
- The detailed **research questions** to be addressed should be clearly stated.
- Clearly state and describe both the framework and specific **methods** for the analysis proposed, and explain the reasons for your choice. Take care to explain any innovation in the methodology or methods, or how different methodologies or methods may be combined.

- If the research involves **data collection** or acquisition you must demonstrate that you have carried out a datasets review, and explicitly state why currently available datasets are inadequate for the proposed research. The data, materials or information to be collected should be clearly stated, and the methods for achieving this explained. Where access to people or archives is needed, indicate clearly the records, population or samples to be consulted, and any permissions already obtained.
- ESRC is committed to funding excellent research which is also adventurous, speculative and innovative, and with the potential for scientific and/or user impact. Where there are **risks** associated with such research please outline any measures which will be taken to mitigate them.
- Indicate the expected **outputs** - both academic and those orientated to (potential) users (eg articles, papers, datasets, events). Where possible, describe the expected impact.
- Include details of any potential for linkages to other research activities (for example, those supported by other funding bodies in the UK or beyond) or for international **collaboration**.
- Include details of any **capacity-building** activities.

Once you have the Draft Proposal you need to start editing it down to fit the page limit imposed by the funder – e.g. 6 sides A4 for ESRC, 7 sides A4 for AHRC etc. Check the guidelines!

## *2. Style*

- Everything must be word-perfect; language used should be economical and crystal clear. The text should ensure logical progression e.g. aims, objectives, methodology, timeframe, management, outputs, impact etc.; while avoiding repetition of words, phrases, ideas etc.
- Convince the reader from the outset – the opening paragraph should highlight exactly what the project is about and what it is trying to achieve – in the fewest words possible.
- Redraft and redraft – get your draft read by non-specialists and especially by colleagues who have been successful in the past.

## *3. Methodology*

You must be completely on top of your field and demonstrate that you are. The aims and objectives **MUST** be attainable through your chosen methodology, must be ambitious but attainable with the resources requested and within the timeframe of the project. Collaborations must add value to the project and not be shoehorned in.

## *4. Impact*

Impact is **NOT** dissemination – Impact relates to outcomes -> what is going to be the long-term effect of the results of your research on the material state of the world **BEYOND ACADEMIA?** E.g. society/culture/public policy or services/health/the environment/quality of life...

Impact must:

- Bring benefit to a non-academic group or community
- Create a change in the way a community, business, organisation or other group creates policy, carries out its work, makes money, proposes or executes regulations or laws, views a particular issue etc.
- Be resourced properly; costs specific to impact activities must be identified.

## Costing and Pricing, and Justification for Resources

Writing the Draft Proposal will enable you to start a draft of the resources needed to undertake the research – in terms of the amount of your time you will need to devote to the project; whether you will need to employ a Research Assistant and, if so, for how long; what travel and fieldwork you need to undertake, what materials you need; what conferences you need to attend etc.

Most Research Councils and British Academy projects are funded on a Full Economic Cost (FEC) basis – which is about identifying the total cost of carrying out the project including salaries and institutional overheads. Help is available to plan your budget and to use the costing and approval system. Costs have to be submitted to Research Councils including VAT but without inflation – other funders may have other rules.

### *Justification for Resources*

The second most important document you need to produce is the Justification for Resources, where you need to go into detail about your budget. All costs will fall under the following headings:

**Directly Incurred** – these are costs that would not exist if the project did not exist

- Staff – DI Staff will include RAs, Admin support etc. who are recruited specifically to work on this project
- Travel and Subsistence
- Equipment – only use this for items of equipment that cost more than £10K – this is more applicable for science & tech or health & medicine
- Other Costs – consumables, books, survey fees, vehicle hire, recruitment, publications costs and items of equipment under £10K

**Directly Allocated** – costs of resources used by a project that are shared by other activities

- Investigators \* – salary costs for PI and Co-Is – need to justify time not salary
- Estates \* – part of the institutional overheads, supports buildings and premises costs
- Other Directly Allocated – admin staff, technicians etc. who work on more than one project.

**Indirect Costs** \* - part of the institutional overheads, supports shared services e.g. human resources, library, finance etc.

**Exceptions** - PhD students and international Co-Is (funded at 100%)

\* Do not require justification

The page limit for the Justification is generally 2 sides of A4. This document has to be completed correctly – incorrect Justifications are one of the most common reasons that funders return proposals for correction and resubmission.

## Creating a full proposal and electronic submission

Applications to Research Councils are made through the Research Councils' Joint Electronic Submission system, or Je-S; applications to British Academy, Royal Society, Leverhulme Trust, Wellcome Trust etc. are also sent via electronic submission.

A full Je-S application is made up of the following sections (using ESRC standard research grant as the example):

- Je-S application form
- Case for Support – 6 sides A4
- Justification for Resources – 2 sides A4
- Curriculum Vitae – 2 sides A4 per CV
- Pathways to Impact – 2 sides A4
- List of Publications – 1 side A4 per list
- Data Management Plan – 3 sides A4

Page restrictions – you must use a sans serif font e.g. Arial, Calibri minimum size of point 11. You must use a margin of 2cm all round the page. It is advisable to convert all documents into PDFs before uploading as Word documents sometimes have formatting errors when received by the Research Councils.

## Je-S application form sections

In addition to the attachments you also need to complete a Je-S application form. This is a mixture of basic information such as start and end dates, financial details, summaries of the attachments and information to allow the Je-S Shared Service Centre to direct the proposal to the correct reviewers and Panel meeting. The sections of the form are listed below:

- Project details
- Investigators
- Objectives – main objectives of the research in priority order
- Summary – a summary in plain English that will be published on Gateway to Research if the research is funded
- Academic Beneficiaries
- Staff Duties
- Impact Summary – who will benefit from the research? How will they benefit?
- Ethical Information
- Resources Required – financial details
- Project Partners – other organisations that are making a contribution to the research in addition to the resources requested from the funder, either in cash or in kind. Must be accompanied by a detailed letter of support setting out the contribution to be made. General support/vague letters will be rejected.
- Timetable
- Data Collection – details of the new data to be generated – condensed version of the DMP

- Classifications – Research area e.g. Economics, Law, Music etc. Qualifier e.g. Geographic Area, Time Period. Free text keywords. All to enable Je-S to send the proposal to the best reviewers and the correct panel.

Help is available – with costings, approvals and completion of the Je-S form. Please keep us informed.

## What happens next?

- The application is submitted by Research Services – the Principal Investigator (PI) submits the completed application on JeS which is then routed to the University's submitter pool. The application is checked by the Research Development Officer responsible for supporting your faculty/department and amended if necessary. Research Services only submits the application when all internal approvals have been achieved.
- Shared Service Centre (SSC) review – SSC carries out a technical review e.g. checks that all sections are completed correctly, there are the correct number of CVs etc. If SSC are not happy they will send the application back to Research Services with list of requested changes and a date for return. You can only make the changes they request, any further editing of the application will disqualify it.
- The application is then sent to between 2-4 reviewers depending on availability. Reviewers will comment on the suitability of the proposal in the following sections: Quality and Importance, People, Management of the Project, Value for Money, Outputs, Dissemination and Impact – reviewers will also give a score for each section and for the overall proposal.
- PI response - SSC sends the PI anonymised versions of the reviews and the PI has the opportunity to make a 1-page response to the reviewers' comments. **This is very important**, it is an opportunity to correct any errors of interpretation you think the reviewers have made.
- Peer Review Panel meeting – Proposals receiving an average score of at least 4.5 out of 6 from the external academic reviewers are forwarded to the Panel Members (Introducers) for a funding recommendation. Proposals receiving a lower average score from reviewers are rejected as not meeting the requisite scientific standard. In this case, the referee comments that will be sent with the decision letter may offer some helpful guidance for any future submissions of new proposals. At the full Panel meetings a proportion of proposals will be recommended for funding. Unsuccessful proposals fall into two categories - those which are unsuccessful due to lack of funds, and those which do not meet the requisite scientific standard. A ranked list of recommendations is then considered by the Grants Delivery Group for a final funding decision. The highest-ranked proposals will be funded until the cut-off point for the panel is reached. Anonymous comments will be sent with the decision letter, and the feedback may be helpful if a new proposal is submitted in the future.
- If you are successful the Award letter and budget will be sent out via Je-S to Research Services who will allocate a research 7000 code, set up collaboration agreements if required and will set up the budget on the Agresso financial system. **Congratulations and we hope your project goes well**