

Bookmark Email Download

Contact Support



02 Dec 21, 10:06

By Ferhana Hashem

Related Articles

Resubmissions: Once more unto the breach?



Bouncing back

Four tips for early career healthcare researchers looking to recover from rejected bids

Comment on this article

The first steps of a healthcare research career are often the hardest. Early career researchers (ECRs) may find themselves applying for various grants to demonstrate that their research expertise has the potential for growth. Winning funding is an indication that they are future experts within their specialty and helps them advance along a career path towards leading a large programme of research. Yet the chances of being successful in attracting research funding are slim indeed, and moving on from a funding setback can take weeks, if not months.

The first thing to remember is that even the most celebrated and distinguished senior academics—those who now seem to have to do little more than click their fingers for research funding to fall on them from out of the sky—have all known funding refusals at some point. Maybe even more recently than you think. But beyond reminding yourself of that, what is to be done? There are no quick fixes to turn failure into success, but I can still give you four tips to help move on from funding disappointment.

1. Involve grant-support services

You will be aware of the support services offered by your host institution. But were you aware of the regional grant-support services accessible to all health and social care researchers from the National Institute for Health Research's Research Design Service (RDS), which works from 10 centres in England? The RDS supports new ideas for grant applications and gives assistance with previously unsuccessful applications. This includes peer review to strengthen all elements of an application—the scientific background, methodology, study design, and so on. The RDS also gives advice on common pitfalls.

Getting support from an NHS trust, local authority or home institution is also critical when contemplating resubmission. Quite apart from the essential work that a research office can do to help with budgeting and approving applications, research-office contact also puts ECRs on the radar of the research office, which is very useful indeed. Research-office contact helps ECRs get recognition from their host organisation for the time and effort spent coordinating a grant application. In some institutions, this is recognised when promotions are considered.

2. Get a senior academic on board as joint lead

It can be quite disheartening for an ECR who has led a bid to hear that, despite all their efforts, the application was turned down due to their insufficient expertise in leading successful grants. There is, however, an escape route out of this catch-22. Some NIHR funding programmes, notably the Research for Patient Benefit/Research for Social Care schemes, encourage ECRs to apply as a joint-lead applicant, in partnership with a more senior colleague as mentor. On such bids, it is important that a joint-lead ECR demonstrates they are fully supported by an experienced research team that is able to aid the delivery of the study if successful.

It is also worth noting that the NIHR is far from the only funder offering a similar route into leading on bids. Medical humanities scholars may be interested to learn that the Arts and Humanities Research Council supports a similar setup via its Early Career Research Grant, which involves project leadership from more than one scholar giving guidance to the ECR.

A further way for ECRs to demonstrate their abilities is to join a research network pursuing collaborative multidisciplinary bids and become involved as a co-applicant in a larger, complex programme of research, led by an experienced academic. The European Commission's Horizon Europe funding programmes offer opportunities to join research consortia via its online brokerage events and information days. Of course, whether UK-based researchers will be able to participate still hangs in the balance.

3. Dare to resubmit, if appropriate

It may seem harsh to suggest that anyone applying for funding should not expect success the first time around, considering the hours that will have been spent poring over copious drafts of an application, but that is the nature of the beast—success rates on most schemes are low. In some circumstances, you hear of researchers striking lucky in their first attempt, but in most cases, healthcare researchers find success after a few attempts, having refined their grant application over repeated submissions. Of course, not all bids are worthy of resubmission, and sometimes it will save a lot of future heartbreak to admit that the central idea behind a bid is just not strong enough.

ECRs who are—for want of a better turn of phrase—just trying their luck may feel less wounded and aggrieved when a bid fails, and may be able to look more soberly at whether a resubmission is worth it. There is certainly something to be said for viewing each application as a learning opportunity, allowing the bidder to acquire the advantages of becoming well-versed in the application process. For researchers new to the grants treadmill, knowing how the funding programme works means that there should not be any nasty surprises next time around. It also helps applicants to understand how their host organisation deals with the application process and, most importantly, allows them to gather vital feedback from the funding panel.

4. Embrace the panel's feedback

Using panel feedback to refine an application is essential for those reworking bids for the same funder. Researchers may well initially feel that the panel "did not understand the application", despite the application being clear, or "does not see the topic area as a research priority". It is essential to brush aside such feelings of disappointment and get to grips with the panel's reservations and expectations. A renewed bid may require more than just different phrasing to pass muster; experienced co-applicants may need to be brought into the research team, the budget may need re-evaluating and additional partners may need to be brought on board. Addressing the panel's comments explicitly in the next round will demonstrate that, despite the applicant being an ECR, they are willing to embrace feedback to turn their application into a bid worth funding.

Ferhana Hashem is a reader in health services research and site lead in Kent for the NIHR's Research Design Service South East. She would like to thank RDS colleagues for their contributions to discussions that informed this article.

Image: julesgriff [CC BY-SA 2.0], via Flickr

Comments

Add a comment

You are signed in as James Brooks, Research Professional

Type your message here

Send

Supporting Scotland's vibrant research sector

The RSE's Research Awards programme is open for applications. Stimulating research in Scotland, nurturing promising talent, and enabling international collaboration.

Deadline: Thursday, 24 March

EARLY BIRD REGISTRATION NOW OPEN

OSLO CONFERENCE MAY 4-6 2022

#EARMconference earma.org