

# Applying for Research Grants – *made easy*

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# The question

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- What are the most important things to get right in a successful grant application?
- What do the funders say?
- What do the experts say?
- What do you think?

# What do the funders say?

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- Lots of guidance available, e.g.
- <http://www.phr.nihr.ac.uk/faqs/>
  - Planning and making your application
  - Study design
  - Where to get help with developing proposals
    - [http://www.netscc.ac.uk/funding/developing\\_your\\_proposal.asp](http://www.netscc.ac.uk/funding/developing_your_proposal.asp)

# What do the funders say?

- **Preparing a grant application – a checklist for HSP applicants**

Experience suggests that **the following problems account for a large proportion of applications rejected** by the Health Services and Population Health Research Committee (HSP).

- Imprecise/too many objectives or research questions
- Weak or missing sample size justification
- Unclear or poorly justified assumptions about recruitment and attrition rates
- Inadequately developed or specified interventions
- Key skills or experience missing from the research team
- Under-costing leading to doubts about feasibility
- Over-costing leading to doubts about value for money
- Weak or inappropriate plans for public engagement, dissemination and implementation
- Poor presentation

# What do the experts say?

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- Survey of PHSRN Board members, UKCRC Research Centre and SCPHRP Directors, etc
- ‘What are the three most important things to get right for a successful grant application?’
- “I think grant awarding bodies are generally incredibly conservative/risk-averse so my three would be justification, justification, justification ...”
- “on all the grants boards I’ve sat on, unintelligibly obtuse and seemingly irrelevant work seems to get through on the 'this is a good group, they will do this well' line from the one or two people who claim to understand it while everyone else sits mute, but when population health comes up, everyone chips in to say ‘well, I don’t think this will work, but in any case, I wouldn't have started from there.’”

# What do you think?

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- Spend 10 minutes discussing what you think are the **three** most important things to get right in a project grant application.
- Think about grant applications in general rather than the details of a specific scheme.
- Nominate a scribe to write them down.

# What do the experts say?

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- **Get the questions right**
  - 'Clearly articulated, important/relevant study question.'
  - 'have the applicant team debate all the merits and demerits of various ways of framing each RQ, making sure that the final question(s) chosen are satisfactory to everyone.'
  - 'Without jargon, spell out the relevance of the research question to policy and practice (in plain english).'

# What do the experts say?

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- **Know your funder!**
  - 'Double check the details of the call for bids and/or terms of reference of the funder/competition (and call the funding agency in doubt!) - too many good bids are submitted to the wrong competition and are triaged out by administrative staff before peer-review!'
  - 'Read the guidelines and scope of whatever funding scheme it is, throughout the process. It's a really basic point but often people forget it.'
  - 'Get to know key staff in your institution, in collaborating organisations and at the funder.'

# What do the experts say?

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- **Get the right team together**
  - Clear track record of applicants in delivering on such research.
  - a team of collaborators from all relevant disciplines.
  - ensure that the applicant team is just big enough - BUT NO BIGGER - to cover the sorts of expertise truly needed to execute the grant project competently.
  - a committed team with all the relevant expertise
  - involve good and respected investigators in the application (the Arsenal back four of the past).

# What do the experts say

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- **Attention to detail**
  - 'Meticulous planning with attention to detail'
  - 'Take time over writing the application.'
  - Given that things always go wrong during the application process, leave plenty of time before the deadline
  - 'Coherence and consistency between title, background, research design, methods, costing, timetable, and dissemination and KT plan'

# Key points

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- Get the question right
- Know your funder
- Get the right team
- Attend to detail
  
- Other points
  - Internal peer review
  - Pilot data
  - Clear presentation – understandable to a variety of audiences.
  - Etc.

# Conclusion

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'Happy families are all alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

'This principle can be extended to much else about life ... For most important things, success requires avoiding many separate causes of failure.'

Jared Diamond, *Guns, germs and steel*

