Skills development workshop for early career researchers in the adaptation in the built environment and infrastructure sectors

Achieving impact through stakeholder-focussed proposals, 20&21 January 2016

Session 1: Preparing your proposal

What does impact mean to your research?

Participants considered their individual thoughts about the process of applying for grants. The word spectrum went from ‘excited’ and ‘opportunity’ through to ‘daunted’, ‘fear’ and ‘stress’

On giving 2-minute presentations based on the ‘So What, Now What?’ guides:

- Slides/pictures can be useful for getting straight to the point – help to focus thoughts and illustrate impact.
- There is danger and opportunity in a short brief - you can make impact sound bigger than it is. Be bold but keep realistic.
- You can be effective in only 2 minutes – but be specific for your audience. Think about the impact that makes a difference to them.
- Consider the difference between academic and non-academic impact –‘pathways to impact’ focusses more on non-academic impact.

Presentation: David Holtum, EPSRC, on funding approaches and opportunities

EPSRC runs a competitive process to ensure that the best applications are successful.

- It is important that proposals take account of the context of EPSRC’s wider goals, set out in the strategic plan (https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/about/plans/strategicplan/)

- A ‘pathways to impact’ section is always required. You will not be funded without it, so consider it an integral part when thinking about your research ideas. Consider what stakeholders need and how you will develop that collaboration.

- Reviewers are asked to comment on the pathways to impact section – so read all the guidance on the EPSRC website (there’s lots) and think about what you write from a reviewer perspective

- For early career researchers, there is First Grant Scheme, with a relatively high success rate (https://www.epsrc.ac.uk/funding/howtoapply/routes/newac/firstgrant/). A good pathway to impact statement can be particularly beneficial.
• EPSRC is there to ensure that the process is fair, open and transparent but does not make decisions about which proposals to fund: this is the responsibility of review panels. Feedback from referees is considered very important, as is the candidate’s response to review comments: be polite (not everyone is!) and address each point. Your proposal and interactions with the grant-making process all contribute to a final decision.

• It is generally presumed that the cheaper the better is good: it isn’t! There is no ideal length of time for a grant (up to 5 years…). Safe projects are not more likely to be funded: EPSRC is also looking for ambitious proposals. Multi-disciplinary proposals are welcome and the research councils have systems for dealing with these.

**Structuring a proposal to achieve impact – developing some criteria**

Everyone was asked to take a sample (impact accelerator award) proposal and to adopt the role of a reviewer. What criteria would they use?

The following common ideas emerged:

• Vision – is there clarity of vision and expression?

• Relevance – is the impact necessary, is it of national importance, is the work of long-term significance?

• Stakeholders – right ones considered? One or two key stakeholders in the right field can be more valuable than a long list of less engaged practitioners.

• Stakeholders and impact – are they already engaged, will the work reach the intended audience, dissemination, what will be the beneficial impact and is this sustainable? Value of demonstrating existing (successful) collaborations. Consider letters of support.

• Practical details – does the proposal hang together, is it achievable, is the host institution on board? Value for money?

Further discussion highlighted: the benefit of structuring the proposal to make the reviewer’s job easier, using quotes and stories to communicate excitement and enthusiasm. Always talk to the funding agency early in the process to get initial feedback. Make sure you show ‘how’ you are going to achieve impact, not just ‘what’.

**Session 2: Maximising your success**

**Top tips from successful applicants**

Phil Grunewald, [http://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/people/pgrunewald.html](http://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/people/pgrunewald.html), has a 5-year EPSRC Fellowship and offered some lessons and advice based on his experience.

• Read the manual first – check you have all the information and know the criteria and requirements

• Think about your key innovative area, identify the WOW factor
• Consider many avenues for achieving impact – use networks, policy/practice, colleagues, middle actors. Look beyond conventional approaches.

• Look to project partners for support, but make sure their letter of support are personalised

• Don’t give up. Be positive and polite when responding to reviewers’ comments (they may be conflicting). Work within the system to use your response to strengthen your position.

• It is difficult to start with a blank page. But build on your existing research, discuss ideas with others, start with bullet points, mind map, whatever works for you.

• Looking for funding is hard work and takes longer than you think; be prepared take rejection and learn from it to make proposals stronger.

• Advice and support from your supervisor/colleagues is essential. Involve them at an early stage to reap the benefit of their experience and ideas. Use them to discuss your plans, review your ideas, proof-read your application and practice your interview techniques. BUT – you will need to take advice selectively: it’s your decision in the end.

• Proposal writing is a skill, so check with your institution what support/training they can offer. Recognise you may not have all the skills necessary (e.g. project management) so ask for help.

Briony Turner, ARCC network, has been on several review panels and provided top tips from a reviewer perspective.

• Recognise that reviewers’ time is always limited. Keep within brief, use the headings given in the criteria. Make it easy to review.

• Credibility is everything (and easily lost). Be realistic, explain your innovation upfront, give evidence. Make sure the text is concise and reads well. Avoid acronyms.

• Gantt charts/timelines are important. Make sure yours is top quality. As are CVs, which will be scrutinised carefully to make sure you have the right expertise in the team.

• Stakeholders can help - but think carefully about your offer and be sensitive to their constraints. A personal approach is often best in the first instance. Use colleagues networks, professional bodies, ARCC network to identify contacts.

**Developing your own proposal – the practical issues**

Participants were asked to think about the practical issues that need to be addressed when formulating a project/fellowship plan. The aim was to consider the range of processes and approaches that need to be considered when developing a timeline of activities through to completion and submission of a proposal.

A number of general timing and planning-related issues were raised in discussion:
• It takes longer than you think. You need to consider at least 2 timelines: your own and also when funding opportunities are available.

• Don’t be afraid to use expertise within the research councils. They are there to help. But factor in time to reach the right person.

• Think about internal administration from the start. Go and see those responsible for co-ordinating research proposals (including finance) at your institution, don’t rely on an email. Understand their timing requirements for providing information and approving a proposal.

• Establishing links with industry partners or other stakeholders is very time consuming – so start early. A one-page ‘case for support’ is a very helpful introduction and prioritise your engagement. Always sense-check with stakeholders before submitting.

• Critical to make sure you are familiar with the online application form before the deadline – how do you fill it in, what additional documents are needed and in what format? Don’t leave this to the last minute.

Session 3: Preparing for the review

Presentation: Approaching the review process and panel interview

Roger Street, UKCIP/ARCC network, reflected on his experience as a reviewer and gave his recommendations on how to approach the review process and interview.

• Have a plan/timeline: understand what is required of the call and make sure you include time to engage stakeholders, get feedback, make revisions; and submit all the material you need. Acknowledge and accommodate the competing demands on the time of you and others.

• Engagement is important (who needs to be involved, what will they do?) Stakeholder mapping (includes your peers, reviewers, research council contacts) can help identify alternative supporters if you first choice isn’t available.

• Show you understand the call: create an outline, develop a narrative to assert the main messages, make your content relevant (no stretch-to-fit, don’t throw everything at the proposal) and consider how your proposal will withstand the review process.

• Show ambition and innovation and embed this in your narrative and main messages. Permit flexibility to accommodate changes as research develops and new issues emerge. For new leaders it is important to demonstrate how you will grow and learn.

• Pathways to impacts – absolutely crucial. What is the range of impacts? How can you realise and evaluate the impact? Demonstrate how your industry and user links will work.

• Your response to review comments is part of the assessment process. Don’t criticise, remain positive and link to your main message/storyline.

• If you have an interview, understand what you will have to do. Will there be a presentation? How many will be on the panel? Practice and get feedback, but trust your judgement – you
know your work best. If being interviewed as a team, ensure that everyone gets chance to contribute, not just the senior researcher: your relationship will be part of the assessment. Your presentation can help to guide the panel to particular questions – so not everything necessarily has to go into your presentation.

- You will need to demonstrate excellence in communications and management. Have you got a strong enough relationship with your department and stakeholders that they can refer to this in their letters of support?

Developing pathways to impact in a proposal.

Participants were asked to develop a 3-minute presentation summarising their Pathways to impact. This was presented to a panel who then asked questions of each participant (some based on the specimen questions EPSRC provide to their interview panel members http://www.arcc-network.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/ECR/ARCC-ECR3-specimen-questions.pdf )

During an excellent set of presentations, the following points emerged:

- Get the timing right – you will have been advised how long is available. Think about pace.
- Think about the structure and balance - don’t spend too long on a detailed introduction, get your key messages across in good time. Respond to the brief.
- Short, focussed messages work well. Starting with an accessible example helps to provide insight and context – remember reviewers may not be specialists in your area
- Be specific – e.g. name individual stakeholder organisations and how they may benefit/be involved. Terms such as ‘policymakers’ are very broad and need explaining.
- Use examples to demonstrate context, engagement, leadership and other qualities - don’t just rely on your research track record - and show how you will build on these
- Be willing to ask for clarity on questions, develop a dialogue
- Make sure you answer the question – but then use the opportunity to expand into any area you missed in your presentation
- Be open if you’re not able to answer a question. Take it on board and consider how you can link with it.
- Think carefully about the value of using slides – they can detract from the messages you are trying to get across. Use for support only. Don’t talk towards them, face your audience.
- If you use slides, simple schematics work well rather than loads of text
- Be positive in your language. Avoid words like ‘hopeful’ which suggest doubt. Give confidence.