

Appendix 5: Research funding

EPSRC, BBSRC and MRC

Getting advice on remit

It would seem from the case studies that not all applicants are either aware of, or see the need to, seek advice from the Research Councils on remit. More importantly, applicants do not always agree with the decision as to which Research Council should lead on a proposal.

Research Councils state that grant applicants can seek advice directly from BBSRC, EPSRC and MRC at any time and it is part of the role of the programme teams / committee secretariats to advise on both scientific remit and procedure prior to submission of a formal application.

BBSRC, EPSRC and MRC respond to many requests for advice from potential applicants on a regular basis. Within EPSRC, the Cross-disciplinary Interfaces Programme (C-DIP) enables the engineering and physical sciences research community to engage with the life sciences. As part of this, the programme operates an informal "outline service" which allows researchers to seek advice prior to submitting a formal application. When BBSRC, EPSRC or MRC provide advice on research that spans remits, that advice should have been discussed and agreed between relevant Research Councils prior to being conveyed to applicants. Following this advice, subsequent applications may be led by the EPSRC, BBSRC or MRC with appropriate co-funding from other funders.

Despite advice available from the BBSRC, EPSRC and MRC, and for a range of different reasons, applications are not always submitted to the correct research council. The case study interviews revealed that moving applications between Research Councils can cause delays and additional work for researchers. An example was given of an applicant for whom delay had meant that the researcher with the relevant expertise had moved on and the expertise has been lost to the applicant's group. Another example was cited where the work had been done elsewhere during the delay and was no longer relevant.

Reviewing grant applications

The UK Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust mainly draw their peer reviewers from national and international academic experts in the relevant fields but industrial experts are also used.

The EPSRC states that it selects most reviewers and members of prioritisation panels from a College of peer reviewers that is nominated by the research community. At the time of accepting their nomination, College members indicate their research expertise. The EPSRC does not use standing panels, instead panels are convened in order to review the set of proposals received. Written reviews are received to support decision-making at the panel meeting, in the same way that the other Research Councils and the Wellcome Trust obtain written reviews in advance of committee meetings. In cases where an application is considered to cross Research Council boundaries, the lead Council will seek suggestions for referees from the co-funding Council, in order to ensure applications are assessed by referees with appropriate expertise. Each proposal is considered in the most appropriate responsive mode panel, based on the predominant relevant Programme area within EPSRC remit, for example Chemistry, Physics or ICT. Panel members with relevant expertise in the life sciences are included in the Programme panel membership to facilitate this process and speak on proposals, where appropriate. Proposals are considered within the Programme panels to ensure the quality of both the engineering/physical science research and the multidisciplinary life-science elements.

This report finds that it is not clear to successful applicants whether they had received LSI funding or standard EPSRC Programme funding and this seems to be causing confusion.

Some respondents thought that EPSRC's system worked well enough but others felt that because any panel meets only once, it left the panel members unable to develop any strategy or to implement EPSRC's strategy of supporting the chemistry-biology interface. The EPSRC advise that Programme Strategic Advisory Teams (SATs) as opposed to peer review panels provide strategic advice to EPSRC on the research and training elements of the respective programmes, paying particular attention to multidisciplinary opportunities.

In contrast, project applications submitted to BBSRC are reviewed by a number of referees with appropriate

expertise. They are nominated by the applicants and committee members, and also selected from BBSRC's referees database. Applications at the chemistry-biology interface are then, in most cases, assessed by the Biomolecular Sciences Committee. While conducting research for this report we were told of a situation where an application requested two post-docs but only one was funded and that the researcher considered that the application was falling in a gap. BBSRC's research committees do occasionally reduce the staff resources on a project application but this is based on expert judgement, and reflects the committee's role in advising on the allocation of funding.

Information on funding available from the **EPSRC** can be found at <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/ResearchFunding/HowToApply/default.htm>

EPSRC Programmes

<http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/ResearchFunding/Programmes/default.htm>

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Information on funding available from the **BBSRC** can be found at <http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/apply/index.html>

BBSRC Engineering and Biological Systems

http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/grants/engineering_biological/index.html

Contact: Sophia Abbasi

Email: sophia.abbasi@bbsrc.ac.uk

BBSRC Biomolecular Sciences

http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/funding/grants/biomolecular_sciences/index.html

Contact: David McAllister

Email: david.mcallister@bbsrc.ac.uk

Information on funding available from the **MRC** can be found at

<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/OurResearch/TheResearchBoards/MolecularandCellularMedicineBoardMCMB/index.htm>

The Wellcome Trust

Information on funding available from the Wellcome Trust can be found at

<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/index.htm>