The Partnership Model: Support of Grant Applications

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At the request of internal auditors, the University is reviewing its processes for preparation of research grant applications. The goal is to establish good governance and to ensure that the University submits competitive applications, which if funded allow research to be sustained as efficiently as possible. The review is timely in that processes can be coordinated with the new Business Systems scheduled for 2017/18.

The University Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee (RKEC) views as fundamental the understanding that each research grant won by the University of Dundee is a three-way partnership between the individual researcher (or team), the funder and the wider University. (Sometimes, of course, there are additional partners, e.g. fellow universities or companies.) This intrinsic partnership is often overlooked or misunderstood, but it is essential in allowing each party to bring something of value to the others and is the foundation for successful and sustainable research at scale. The researcher employs their creativity and ability to win funding and bring research activity to the University, to further their research vision, and to support excellent knowledge discovery. This in turn enhances the reputation of the University. The funder provides the direct costs of the research and often a significant contribution to the indirect costs. The funder also provides the framework and administrative support for evaluating research to ensure that the best research is funded. The wider University hosts the funded research, and in doing so provides a range of significant resource to the activity, e.g. salaries, administrative support, technical infrastructure and physical environment. The wider University also provides a mentorship and career development for researchers earlier in their careers.

The sum of the research funds won by the academic and the resource required to be provided by the University equals the full economic cost (FEC) of the research. External grants typically cover between 30% and 80% of the activity’s FEC depending on levels of overhead associated with the funding, the strategic effectiveness with which grant application budgets are constructed, and the efficiency of the environment in which the research is ultimately performed. This range is calculated including the Research Excellence Grant (REG) from the Government. The remainder of the FEC is required to be contributed by the University from other funds (typically, surpluses from teaching activities). Recognition of the financial balance of the partnership is crucial. As such, each grant application needs to fulfil the following criteria:

1. Excellent quality
2. Net %FEC recovery clearly understood and agreed upon at School and University levels
3. Aligned to strategic priorities of the relevant School(s) and University

Point 1 refers to quality, which is implicit in everything the University seeks to do, and is a fundamental basis for all research activity.
Point 2 on sustainability is the main focus of this paper. As indicated above, the University does not currently have sufficiently robust processes in place to ensure that all grant applications fulfil point 2. The PRF form provides a paper trail of grant applications, but is often completed quite late in the application process. (The paper PRF will be replaced by electronic sign-off through Business Transformation later in 2017.) Given that each research grant is based on a partnership, it is essential that a substantive dialogue between the academic and the University underpins each application. The extent of this dialogue will vary according to the nature of the application, as explained in more detail below, but the University's interests will typically be represented by the Associate Dean of Research in the relevant School.

Point 3 on strategy is particularly important for very large grant proposals, which often span multiple Schools and require significant University resource. Strategy is relevant to smaller proposals too, and the University will use its finite resource to give priority to research of the highest quality, best aligned to our mission of transforming lives.

School and University Managers often have first sight of applications only shortly before grant deadlines, rendering ineffective both strategic decision-making and financial planning of research costs. This lack of control has negative consequences in a number of respects: i) a lack of strategic planning and costing during the early stages of grant preparation, particularly for large bids, ii) a lack of internal review for quality and optimal configuration of University strengths and resources, iii) a significant weakening of financial planning at managerial levels, particularly to ascertain affordability of certain activities within School and University budget envelopes and iv) inefficient use of academic and professional staff time on bids which have little chance of funding success.

Sustainability
The great diversity of grant applications, in terms of size, funder, disciplinary mix, environment etc, necessitates a sensitive and nuanced approach to approval and management. It is not possible in this paper to cover all possible types of grant applications, and many decisions will rest with the Deans and ADRs in discussion with the academic principal investigator (PI), following the guidelines given above. Through the work of RKEC and ADRs, greater emphasis will be placed on sustainability discussions within Schools, to ensure the costs associated with the application are within the budget envelope of the School, and on robust internal peer review to ensure quality of proposals. Three subclasses of grant application are discussed below (and in more detail in the Appendix).

Very Large Applications (>£5m)
Applications of this scale will have very significant impact for the University, both in terms of their reputation-building potential and their financial implications. All such applications require early discussion (minimum six months prior to deadline, unless, as sometimes happens, a shorter deadline is imposed by the funder) with the VP Research and the Director of Finance to allow communication with the University Executive Group and the University
Court, and subsequent discussion on strategic priority within the basket of other opportunities and projects of this scale.

**Small Applications (<£50k)**

Small grant applications below £50k amount to ca 25% of total grant application activity at the University, yet represent only ca 1% of financial value and overhead. Thus, such applications have a significant cumulative cost to the University in terms of FEC, in particular administrative resource. In many cases these applications are highly strategic for the academic and allow key projects to be completed. Such awards can also be of tremendous value to early career researchers (ECRs) in getting ‘a foot on the ladder’ of funding and building their research reputation. However, in some cases awards of this scale are used to sustain research activity of insufficient quality to attract major funding, and this is inappropriate in terms of all of the criteria: quality, sustainability, strategy. Henceforth the University will only approve applications for small awards if one or more of the following criteria are satisfied:

- the PI is an ECR; or
- the PI has a well-funded and sustainable research environment, and the application for a smaller award is strategic to seed-fund new research; or
- the research will take place in a demonstrably low-cost setting and is conducted by a PI with an excellent track record of research (who will then effectively cover the FEC through their contribution to the REG).

Applications for small awards that fall outside of these criteria will only be approved in exceptional circumstances.

**Medium to Large Applications (£50k to £5m)**

This is obviously a very large range, and encompasses most of the grant applications from the University, particularly in the STEMM areas. The key partnership contact in these cases is the ADR (or their delegates in Schools with very high flux of applications). The University expects early discussion between the PI and the ADR (at least two months, unless the deadline period is exceptionally short), and early involvement with Research Finance to help build an indicative budget which is within the range allowed by the funder and which, particularly for opportunities with low overhead return, optimises the recovery of FEC. In all cases PI time should be faithfully indicated in line with the School’s workload model. The ADR (or delegate) will ensure over this pre-submission period that the application is aligned to the School’s research strategy and receives robust internal peer review. The University of Dundee must not submit applications to any funder which are of poor quality – this wastes University resource, PI time and results in reputational damage on funding panels.

In summary, the Partnership Model is designed to make clearer the co-dependency between PIs and the wider University, to provide enhanced support to PIs and Schools and to improve funding success rates and sustainability of research projects. It is not designed to be a ‘one size fits all’ approach, and the VPR is keen to work with each School (through their Research Committee) to tailor the model to their research portfolio and associated funding opportunities.