Short notice research funding calls are bad for researchers and research

Adam Golberg *argues that short notice funding calls are an inherently poor mechanism for producing good research projects and that by reducing the time necessary for preparation, such calls introduce inequity into the selection process and potentially damage the reputation of research funders.*

I've worked in Research Development in various roles for about fifteen years, and one issue that's causing me increasing concern is the number of 'short notice' funding calls with very little time between call announcement and submission deadline. Within the last year I can think of several where the time available has been far too short given the complexity and ambition of what the funders have hoped to achieve with their investment. This is a problem.

Short notice calls are unfair on researchers with caring responsibilities, on those with larger teaching or leadership and management responsibilities, and on those who are struggling to work from home. This was true before COVID, though COVID has shone a belated spotlight on the issue. Short notice deadlines provide an unfair advantage to those who *are* able to drop (nearly) everything else to work up a proposal. The greater the scale and ambition of the call, the greater the advantage. It's one thing if it's a short notice call for a small project or pump-priming grant, but if it's for seven figure sums, requires complex collaborations, and/or is for cutting edge interdisciplinary science which requires careful negotiation and discussion between partners, it's much harder to do.

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Short notice calls are bad even for those in positions of relative privilege. Although they may give some researchers a competitive advantage, short notice calls ask a lot of them in terms of time and energy and concentration over a short period of time. There are serious implications for work/life balance. When a system is harmful even for the beneficiaries, there's something wrong.

Short notice calls are bad for research. Research funding calls are supposed to fund the best research. Not a subset of the best research, submitted only by those who have the time and energy to put together a competitive application. There's perhaps an assumption that a research grant application is just a case of completing the paperwork. It's not. It requires reading and understanding the call. It requires detailed discussions with colleagues and collaborators. It requires sculpting a project to meet the funders' objectives, deciding what should go in, what should be cut, how the overall project should be presented and framed. Above all, it requires a lot of thinking.

Short notice calls are also bad for confidence in organisations that fund research. When a major call appears with no advance notice and a very short deadline, the suspicion is that a privileged few *did* have advance notice. The worry is that those insiders have either already been earmarked for funding, or else will have an advantage that it would be impossible for any rival to catch them from a standing start.

It's a good thing never to assign to conspiracy what could be explained by more mundane factors, such as funder pressure to get the money out of the door or risk losing it. However, there have been cases where some researchers *did* have advance notice that was not widely available. And my worry is that short notice deadlines will give the impression of a closed shop and discourage applications.

So why do funders to it?

I can understand some of the drivers for short notice deadlines, and even sympathise with some of them. During the COVID crisis there was an urgent need to get relevant research projects up and running, or existing projects that could contribute retooled and refocused. I think few would quibble with short notice calls in the face of a pandemic.

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I can also sympathise with attempts to reduce research bureaucracy and speed up processes. A major complaint I hear from research grant applicants is about the time it takes from deadline to outcome to project start date. I'm sure for research funders there's a desire to shorten the process between decision to run a particular scheme and money allocated and spent. But I'm not convinced that the costs in terms of reduction of range and quality of applications is worth the benefit of making decisions a few weeks or a month faster, especially if we're talking about multi-year and multi-million investments.

There are better ways of speeding up funding decisions and reducing burden. Greater use of outline applications to allow an early sift add to complexity but could serve to reduce applicant and reviewer burden. Better incentives and rewards for peer reviewers/funding panel members might also help.

Fixing the system

One way to make short notice calls less onerous would be to **trail them in advance.** Even if not the full call, even if not all the rules, even if not the precise timing. Give enough information to plan, and we can plan.

It's relatively common for a theme or topic to be mentioned in a broad funder strategy document covering four or five years. Research managers will often know that *something on X* is coming, but not quite what or when or in what form. The nature of academic jobs is that there's always something that needs doing either *now* or *nearly now* – marking, paper revisions, and so on. It's very hard to persuade busy researchers to focus on what might be coming within the next few *years* rather than on what is definitely coming within the next few *days*.

It's never been easier to communicate with the research community, so updates or advance notice as decisions are taken and topics move from strategic aspiration to operational plan ought to be possible. When I see a short notice call, it's usually obvious that it's been in preparation for a while – decisions have been taken about call rules, application documentation, and so on. If funders could let the research community know at that stage, it would make a substantial difference.

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