

In a fractured funding landscape, the ESRC are looking to invest in excellence with impact. A combination of academic merit and project management skills is essential

by Blog Admin

August 10, 2011

Last month the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) announced the first call for proposals for the newly integrated Centres and Large Grant Competition 2011-12. [Adam Golberg](#) navigates the stormy waters of funding competitions and here dissects exactly what the ESRC are looking to invest in ... just don't mention the Big Society.



The ESRC [Centres and Large Grants competition](#) was launched in mid July. Before its launch, we already knew a few things – that the full call would be out sometime that month, that it would have some steer towards some version of the three strategic priorities, and that there would be funding for about 5 centres or projects at £2m-£5m each. We knew that the new scheme would be a combination of the formerly-separate Centres and Large Grant schemes. Although there's an argument for that a 'Centre' and a 'Large Grant' are different beasts, this seems to me like another example of a sensible merger of schemes, as with the new [Future Research Leaders](#) call combining the First Grants and the Postdoc Fellowship schemes.

We also knew that competition would be fierce. It must be eighteen months, perhaps longer, since the last comparable call. It wouldn't be surprising, then, if there are two calls worth of ideas and projects being prepared for this call. Unsurprisingly, there's an outline proposal stage, followed by an invited full proposal stage, followed by short listing for interviews. It would be interesting to know how many applications the ESRC foresee making it through each stage. I'm sure this will depend in part on the quality of the applications they receive, but they must have a rough ratio in mind. Whichever way you look at it, even for those with exceptional ideas, the odds aren't great. But then, they seldom are.

So, what do we know now that we didn't know before?

Three priorities

We know that there are three areas – each an aspect of one of the three priorities – which the ESRC would “particularly welcome” applications on:

Risk: The importance of risk and its relationship with behaviours: for individuals and organisations, understanding the role of attitudes, decisions and consequences; for organisations and society the implications of public and practitioner constructions of risk and divergent framings; the challenges for effective governance, national and international – and the significance of social gradients and inequalities in essential areas of risk...

Behaviour change: Causes and agents of behavioural change: understanding how social norms, signals and triggers such as new technologies or novel regulation impact on decisions and actions of people, social groups and organisations, how and why behaviour changes at key periods and in what social, national and international contexts – thus informing the development and evaluation of interventions...

Community, participation and democracy in an era of austerity: Understanding how individuals and communities most effectively make their voices heard, and how social and physical mobility changes when in countries like the UK, the state retrenches...

Some might regard the third priority area as a brave move after the [AHRC controversy](#). But I guess as long as no-one mentions the government's “BS” by name, probably no-one will notice. And it is a legitimate and important area for research.

So... three themes, an open element, and five to be funded. One per theme and two open seems a likely outcome, though I'm sure that's not pre-decided. I guess the question for those with a project in mind is how far they're willing and able to bend it to meet the themes, or whether they just ignore the steer and aim directly at the open element of the call. And the question for the decision-makers is how they respond to bids that are covered in crowbar marks that are hidden under a thin veneer of priority-speak. I think my advice to potential applicants would probably be to either to write an application that speaks directly and indisputably to one of the three areas of steer, or to go for the open element. Or to swerve this call entirely, and go for the Research Grants scheme, which has an upper limit of £2m, the same as the lower limit for this call.

Delivering the results

What else is striking about the call? That academic merit alone won't be enough. Not to be trusted with up to £5 million quid of taxpayer's cash in a time of austerity.

"...but it is likely that successful applications will be led by experienced researchers who are internationally recognised and have a well established publication track record within their field of study, and where we can be assured of the ability to manage a large scale research project." [my underline]

And from the list of assessment criteria:

"A robust management structure with a nominated director(s) (for Centre applications) and clear arrangements for co-ordination and management of the strategic direction of the Centre/Grant"

At outline stage, one page of the available four for the Case for Support needs to be a Management Plan. A full quarter of the available free text space, even at this early stage of the process. The 'Pathways to Impact' document is not part of the outline stage, but the Management Plan is. That surely tells its own story – have a strong account about project management to tell, or don't expect to make it to the next stage.

And of course, it makes sense. If I were in the unenviable position of thinning the field in the search for the famous five to be funded, one sifting approach I'd want to use is to knock out any that – regardless of the brilliance of their ideas – I don't feel absolutely confident in trusting with the money. These are massive, massive investments, and they've got to deliver. They've got to give the ERSC success stories to shout about, given the relative generosity of the flat cash CSR settlement. They just *have to*.

I hope there's space for creativity and delegation in management planning, though, rather than expecting a superhuman PI to do everything. And I hope other kinds of management experience (Head of School and similar roles, pre-academic career experience) as well as running large research projects will be acceptable assurances of ability. In the medium and long term, though, with the fractured funding landscape, I can't help but wonder how people are meant to get experience of leading projects.

One other thing struck me. I was half-expecting that there might be some kind of 'demand management' measure here, perhaps limiting each institution to submitting one bid as lead partner. But I'm pleased to see that there's nothing like that – institutions aren't in a good position to choose between competing proposals, as they lack experts without a conflict of interest. Which is one of the reasons why I'm against Quota systems of demand management.

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