



# A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS



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## OVERVIEW

This guide is written for those who are seeking fellowship opportunities at the University of Edinburgh as well as researchers at Edinburgh who are seeking out national and international opportunities. It is aimed at researchers new to fellowship applications and those who wish to refine their skills.

It helps you to understand different types of fellowships, provides you with guiding questions for self-reflection to assist you in identifying what type of fellowship might be most suitable for you at your career stage, and guides you through the essentials of a compelling narrative for your application. In addition to practical top tips, the guide promotes the benefits of fellowship application writing (even if unsuccessful) and directs you to further resources.

### About the Author

This guide was written by Dr Anna Pilz, Academic Developer and Trainer at the Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh, on the basis of her experiences in writing successful applications for visiting fellowships at research centres and to postdoctoral funding schemes (Irish Research Council and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions), and her workshops run at the IAD on 'Developing a Funding Profile' and 'Writing your First Fellowship Application'.

[www.ed.ac.uk/iad/researchers](http://www.ed.ac.uk/iad/researchers)



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## WHAT IS A FELLOWSHIP?

Fellowships are awarded, first and foremost, to people. Any fellowship application has you, your research expertise, skills, professional development, and career goals at its core. Highly prestigious as well as competitive, a fellowship comes with sought-after benefits.

### Benefits

Fellowships offer you – the fellow – the opportunity for:

- focused research time;
- professional development & international networking;
- strategic opportunities to shape your career trajectory through training & mobility;
- research independence & credit for ownership of ideas;
- transferrable skills in project management and grant capture;
- increased potential for future funding success;
- competitive edge in the academic job market.

In more pragmatic terms, fellowships are often for researchers who are not on a permanent employment contract. As such, fellowships often cover the fellow's salary cost, in addition to research expenses. Note: some schemes such as the Marie Curie Postdoctoral scheme includes a mobility and family allowance. If your personal circumstances require relocation to a different country, do enquire with the host institution and funder regarding relocation and visa costs.

### Types of Fellowships

Fellowships come in different shapes and sizes, both in terms of their duration as well as their research budgets. There are dedicated funding schemes for different career stages from postdoctoral level and mid-career to advanced stages. (For a list of UK-specific schemes and funders, see 'Further Resources' section on page 22 of this Guide). Fellowship opportunities can assist you in your professional development and in building a narrative of funding success as a researcher and research leader. Types of fellowships include, for instance:

- short- to medium-term fellowships for different career stages (postdoctoral/early career, mid-career and leadership fellowships);
- visiting fellowships at research centres or Centres/Institutes for Advanced Studies (e.g. [IASH](#) at Edinburgh);
- summer schools and training fellowships;
- library or archive-specific fellowships that enable access to resources;
- writing fellowships to facilitate exchange (useful as bridge-time post PhD or during sabbatical).

There are also fellowships schemes that target particular types of activities such as cross-sectoral collaboration ([Marie Curie COFUND](#)) or schemes that facilitate reintegration into research after a career outside of academia (e.g. [Daphne Jackson Fellowships](#)). It is well worth considering your circumstances and career goals to identify the most suitable fellowship opportunity. Note that visiting fellowships often only cover travel costs and don't include a salary.

**TOP TIP**

**Don't dismiss short-term fellowships too quickly. They can offer you a stepping-stone to a bigger fellowship application, facilitating international networking and collaboration. If you are a mid- or advanced-career researcher, consider incorporating visiting or writing fellowships into research grant applications. Centres for Advanced Studies or field-specific research centres often welcome international visiting scholars who bring their own funding.**

## FINDING OPPORTUNITIES

### Opportunities at Edinburgh

To identify and target the fellowship scheme most relevant to your personal circumstances, it is advisable to scope out the opportunities available to you. Research-intensive universities – in the UK as well as internationally – will have dedicated research support services who can assist you in identifying suitable schemes. At the University of Edinburgh, your first port of call would be the [Edinburgh Research Office](#). Colleges and Schools also have local research offices. They have all up-to-date information and will be able to direct you to open-access and internal resources.

### Other Opportunities

There are various well-established fellowship schemes that run on an annual basis such as the Leverhulme Early Career Fellowships, the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships, and the British Academy Postdoctoral or Mid-Career Fellowships in the UK context, or the Marie Curie Actions in the European Context. Such schemes often only run one application round per year, making it essential to familiarise yourself with the call deadlines to give yourself plenty of time for preparing your application.

To identify further opportunities, there are databases and funding portals that list open calls for schemes. The following webpages are a helpful starting point:

[Funding Finder, UK Research and Innovation](#)

[Research Professional](#)

[Jobs.ac.uk](#)

[Euraxess \(European Commission\)](#)

If you are a member of [learned societies](#) or research associations and organisations, subscribe to their newsletter to learn about any short-term fellowship opportunities. At conferences, institutions or subject associations might also advertise open calls and colleagues in your network can direct you to further opportunities.

## Choosing the Right Scheme for You

As you do your horizon scanning, it might be worth logging information for schemes you identify as suitable. The points below offer some suggestions what to look out for to compare and contrast schemes.

- Am I eligible?
- Am I likely to be competitive at my career stage?
- When is the deadline?
- Do I need to identify and approach a mentor or advisory board?
- Can I re-submit if I'm unsuccessful (and would I still be eligible)?
- Does the funding include relocation and visa costs?
- Is there a family or disability allowance?
- What are the research expenses and how does that impact what I'll be able to do?
- What is the emphasis of the scheme? (reintegration, writing, training, mobility, project completion, project start etc)

These might seem like straightforward questions, but fellowship eligibility can be confusing as funders try to be inclusive to people with different career paths. If you aren't sure, it's vital to talk to someone in your research office or the funder directly. They are as keen as you to avoid the frustration of an ineligible application.

Ask your School or Research Office (and your mentor if required for the scheme) for an honest assessment of your competitiveness for your chosen scheme. This will assist you in planning your application strategy, and help you in deciding for or against a Fellowship Scheme.

## PREPARATION

### On Timing

Timing is crucial to a successful fellowship application. Some schemes only offer you a short window of opportunity to apply. For instance, the eligibility for early career fellowship schemes might only lie between 1 to 3 years after your PhD viva or graduation. However, this is becoming less common as funders recognise that academics have different career paths and can have career breaks. Depending on your post-PhD career journey, a teaching-intensive period may pose challenges to the competitiveness of your profile at the mid-career stage, making it vital to set out clearly that your “research active” time falls within the limits of the scheme. While some funders will show some flexibility, others continue to apply temporal boundaries around such terms as early- or mid-career researchers and experienced Principal Investigators in eligibility criteria which do not adequately represent the lived realities in the research environment. It is therefore crucial that you have a clear understanding of the eligibility criteria for your selected fellowship schemes and put these in relation to your research career stage. The bad news is that you have no control over the eligibility criteria. The good news is that you are in control of the narrative of your application. And the better you are prepared, the higher your chances to submit a compelling application.

### Start Early

It is advisable to start looking for opportunities and begin to prepare your application as early as possible. Your first steps are:

- horizon scanning for opportunities;
- identification of suitable schemes;
- identifying potential mentor/a for your project;
- reaching out to Research Offices and research support services at host institutions;
- mapping out a work plan, taking institutional and funder deadlines into account (some universities have a pre-selection process where they decide which candidates to put forward to the external funder);
- articulating your strengths as a researcher and how the fellowship will advance your research career;
- developing your research profile through dissemination and communication strategies;
- having conversations with peers, senior colleagues and peer reviewers of fellowship schemes to learn as much as you can.



**TOP TIP**

Do an early and honest appraisal of your achievements and focus on any potential weaknesses or concerns evaluators may see in your profile. As this may include a need to improve your publication record, many research support experts suggest looking into fellowships two years before you expect to apply. If you're in the Arts & Humanities and you haven't published your thesis as a monograph (and don't intend to), then be clear in your application that you disseminate your research findings through journal articles and/or chapters. Don't leave evaluators in doubt as to your commitment to the project you're proposing versus any 'left over' projects.

## Familiarise Yourself with your Chosen Fellowship Scheme

Any major fellowship scheme is likely to have a 'Guide for Applicants' that will list the remit, aim, and eligibility criteria for a particular scheme. This is your 'Bible' during the preparation and application process. Pay close attention to the language of the schemes as it gives you clues where to put the focus in your application narrative and to ensure that you meet all the evaluation criteria. To give an example: the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship is a mobility and training scheme, which makes it essential to have international networking and professional development as a key focus in your application.

In addition, and in case that there is no such guide, reach out to the funder / institution that offers the fellowship opportunity and ask for further details as well as information on the evaluation process.

**TOP TIP**

Watch out whether there are any restrictions on resubmitting your application. If you're only given one shot, plan carefully and make sure your profile is competitive by checking the profiles of previous successful candidates. Consider applying strategically to different funders as some may not allow you to apply to other fellowship schemes while they consider your application.

## Make Use of Resources

In addition to a close study of the eligibility and evaluation criteria as well as remit of a fellowship scheme, you should get as much support and advice on your candidacy and application as you can.

### Attend Webinars & Information Sessions

Some funding schemes – such as Leverhulme, British Academy, Wellcome Trust, and Marie Curie – will run regular webinars and information sessions when their fellowship calls open. These offer helpful information and give you the opportunity to ask questions. Often, these webinars invite previous successful applicants to share their experience.

### **Look out for Training Events & Application Workshops**

Most universities offer training workshops on proposal writing and fellowship applications. These can be informational or hands-on. Some universities offer specific application masterclasses for particular schemes (particularly for Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellowships). Keep an eye out on social media channels of funders for such events and ask research support services at the prospective host institution about their support offering.

### **Reach out to Support Services at the Host Institution**

On institutional webpages you can search for research offices and research support services at School, College, and University level. Ask for advice at School level to whom to reach out to and ask for access to previous successful applications.

### **Speak to Successful Applicants**

Successful applicants are generally very happy to share their experiences and, in many cases, are also happy to share their applications with you. It's worth asking.

### **Talk through Your Career Plans**

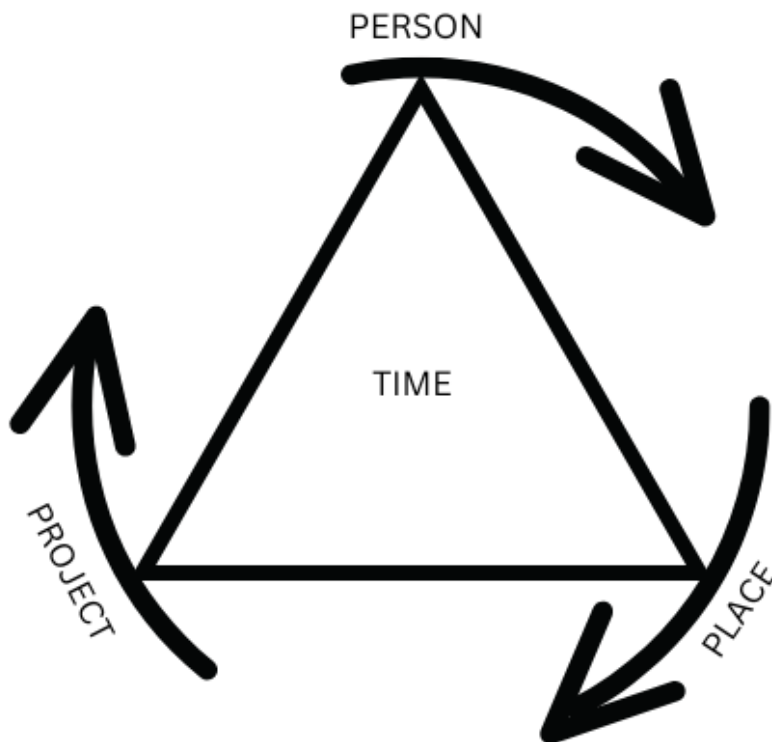
Figuring out your research strategy and career plan can be challenging. Draw on your network and talk to peers as well as senior colleagues and mentors about your plans and seek their advice.

#### **TOP TIP**

**If you're a researcher on a fixed-term contract based at the University of Edinburgh, you have the opportunity to book a 1:1 consultation with the IAD's Career Consultant. For further details, see [here](#). Such career consultations might also be available at other institutions. Do check for information on Career Service and/or Researcher Development.**

## APPLICATION ESSENTIALS – THE 3 Ps & a T

Regardless of what fellowship you are applying for, there are three essential components to a compelling application often referred to as the 3 Ps: Person; Project; Place. In other words, your application documents ought to set out compelling answers to the question why you have the potential to be a research leader and have the skills to deliver the innovative and timely project you're proposing and why your chosen host institution is the ideal place to do so. Think of the relationship between the 3 Ps as one of mutual benefit and synergy.



These 3 Ps sit within the circle of **Time**. In your fellowship application, you want to create a sense of 'this is perfect NOW'. To do so, you need to provide a compelling answer to: 'why now?'. To do so, link your work to recent developments, strategic priorities of funders or institutions, investments in the area that you can connect with and exploit. To give your application the edge of 'timeliness' by building on the momentum of both your leadership potential and the project's innovation that would vanish if funding were delayed could well be the 'tipping point' in pushing you from the fundable to funded pile.

## The PERSON

As fellowships are awarded to people in the first instance (and not projects), it is crucial to start with you.

### Reflection!

This guide invites you to take a moment to reflect on where you are in your research career. What motivates you to apply for the fellowship? (And 'I need a job' won't suffice.) The clearer you can be about your motivation, the stronger your application. What is the next step in your research career? Are you seeking to complete a project or are you beginning a new one? Do you wish to gain inter-sectoral experience? Do you seek to work under the mentorship of a particular researcher? Are you expanding your expertise into a new research area? Are you keen to develop your international network or develop an innovative methodology? Do you require access to specific resources only available at a particular institution or wish to connect with a specific research centre? Are you seeking teaching buy-out to advance your publication profile to enable you to apply for promotion? As you can see, motivations can vary.

Depending on which of the questions above speak to your circumstances, go on to compare the questions to the funder's vision for the fellowship scheme you've identified and determine whether it's a match. Once you have identified suitable scheme/s, you can use the funder's description and phrasing to refine the guiding questions below.

Ask yourself questions such as:

- How do I best describe my research profile for this scheme?
- What are my 3 key achievements to date?
- Which are my top 1 to 3 publications and why?
- Which research field do I wish to advance and how?
- What research activities or esteem indicators highlight my research innovation? (such as PhD funding / essay or poster prizes / research awards / invitation to give a keynote)
- What methodological skills do I have and wish to develop?
- Can I demonstrate leadership in research?
- Can I evidence project management skills?
- Where do I want to be in 3, 5, or 10 years' time? (Where do I want to work? With whom? What type of project? What skills, expertise, network and collaborators do I need to get there?)

To answer such questions and to apply them in the context of your fellowship application, it is helpful to think about your past experiences that have led to your present role and expertise, and articulate how the fellowship will enable you to achieve your career objectives in the future. Often, fellowship schemes such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – as the title indicates – are aimed at candidates who demonstrate leadership potential in their respective field. Therefore, it is crucial that you identify areas where you are evidencing your leadership and leadership potential.

The table below is designed to help you in this reflective activity. It is based on (and expands) the '[Research Careers Tool](#)', developed by the University of Edinburgh. You can map relevant experiences you have, are currently developing and will have gained through the fellowship. You can also consult the '[Competency Framework for Research Funding](#)', developed by the Edinburgh Research Office, for further map to your career stage.

**TOP TIP**

**Don't list everything but rather focus on the highlights, using the guiding questions above. Once you've filled out the table, it should give you a strong base from which to start drafting a compelling fellowship application. NOTE: If you are fresh out of your PhD, don't worry if you don't have a long list of things to choose from or an extensive publication profile. You can use the table as a basis of conversation with peers, colleagues and mentors to discuss the strengths of your profile and identify areas for professional development.**

Use the table for bench-marking your profile against the evaluation criteria and person specification as detailed in the Guides for Applicants of your chosen fellowship scheme.

- Do your examples put a spotlight on your achievements and make you stand out?
- Does a fellowship make sense at your current career stage?
- Do you demonstrate potential to be a research leader?
- Will the fellowship assist you in achieving your career objectives?
- Is your profile competitive?

		PAST (your skills, expertise & experiences)	PRESENT (activities in progress)	FUTURE (what the fellowship will enable you to do)
CAREER DEVELOPMENT & PERSONAL LEADERSHIP	Development of Skills			
	Training			
	Mentoring			
	Team Leadership			
	International Links & Networks			
RESEARCH	Fellowships			
	Grants			
	Research Skills			
	Output/Publications			

ENGAGEMENT	Academic dissemination			
	Wider communication			
	Knowledge Exchange / Teaching			
	External Partnerships			
	Mobility			
LEADERSHIP & COLLEGIALLY	Journals			
	Peer Review			
	Collegiality			
	Research Clusters			
	Sectoral Leadership			

## The PROJECT

The project that you're proposing for your fellowship application must enhance your research career. In other words, the project ought to enable you to gain (further) research independence and to develop as a research leader in your chosen field. Commensurate with the stage of your career, your project should therefore be innovative and ambitious. Your current work, skills, and training should make you the ideal person for this project and, in turn, the project will enable you to advance in your career.

## The Pitch

Part of any application is an abstract that summarises the project in a nutshell. The abstract is the pitch with which you can make the first impression for the reviewer of your application. Make sure you address the following questions:

1. What is the project about?
2. Why does it matter and why is it timely?
  - It's advisable to connect your project to the [UN Sustainability Agenda](#) and/or [Global Challenges](#) (where appropriate) as well as the funder's research strategy, where this is appropriate to your research.
  - Think about timeliness both in terms of the fellowship as well as in terms of the project!
3. How will you do it?
  - Methodology
  - This may require resources & involve collaborators (working with others isn't a disadvantage – it demonstrates that you have the trust and respect of colleagues, but you have to be clear about what you will do.)
4. Who are potential stakeholders & target audiences?
  - These need to be reflected in your communication, dissemination, and impact plan, which must be tailored for your target audiences. Increasingly, stakeholders will be asked to review applications, so make sure you have credible ways of engaging them.
5. How will the fellowship build on your profile and enable you to reach your career objectives?
6. Why is the host institution the ideal place for you and the project?
  - This is also important if you want to continue in the same institution where you're currently based. Although there is far less prejudice against applicants who wish to remain in the same place for their careers, you need to convince evaluators that this decision is research led, ideally explaining that it would be perverse and damaging to the project to move.

## The Work Programme / Gantt Chart

Depending on the scheme, you're likely asked to submit a detailed research proposal or work programme. This will detail what will happen when. Some funders ask for this to be submitted in form of a Gantt Chart.



Make sure you take into consideration the following:

- Feasibility
- Milestones
- Deliverables
- Training activities
- Dissemination & Communication activities

Aim to be as specific as you can be. If you wish to disseminate your research findings in form of presentations, for instance, name the research seminars or conferences you'll contribute to, and identify journals or publishers where you will aim to publish your finding. Such details are a useful steer for selection committees to showcase your understanding of the field and the publishing landscape as well as your knowledge and commitment to the research.

**TOP TIP**

**If the funding scheme demands Open Access publication, then do take that into consideration and signal in your dissemination plans how you will ensure that their OA policy is met.**

## **Risk Management**

Make sure that you address the potential risks to the successful implementation of your project and build in risk mitigation measures. It is important to signal to reviewers that you have thought through the project and have contingency plans if required.

**TOP TIP**

**Collaborations might be seen to strengthen contingency plans. If you're seeking to move into a research field / area or methodological approach new to you, it might also be worth thinking about creating an advisory board for your project (Note: This, of course, depends on the scale of the project but might be worthwhile for longer-term fellowships of 3 to 5 years).**

## **Other Components of your Project Proposal**

Fellowship application schemes come with different documentation requirements. Some schemes may also ask for:

- Data Management Plan
- Ethical Considerations and Approval
- Budget and Budget Justification
- Gender Dimension to Research Content
- Professional Development Plan
- Impact Plan

It is worth reaching out to Research and Finance Offices as well as Information Services to get as much support as you can in drawing up these documents. For instance, at the University of Edinburgh [the Research Data Service provides templates for writing a Data Management Plan](#). The Edinburgh Research Office has a guide on [‘How to build knowledge exchange and impact into research’](#) (SharePoint resource that requires EASE login).

Access to previous successful applications and support from the research office at your host institution early on will be crucial.

More information on these fellowship application documents can be found in the excellent [‘Fellowship Videos’ from the Postdoctoral College at Queen’s University Belfast](#).

## The PLACE

As crucial as the who and what is the where of your application. The quality of your host institution's research environment is a key assessment criterion. Your application should convey clearly why your chosen host institution is the best place for you and your project. The argument for the host institution should address:

- why you've chosen the host institution (reputation / expertise / mentor / research group / research centre etc)
- synergies between you and the institution's research strategy and strengths;
- training and professional development opportunities for you;
- mobility (new institution; new country; new School / College within same institution etc);
- international networking opportunities and collaborations;
- how you will benefit from the institution;
- how the institution will benefit from you.

To address these aspects, it is helpful to think about your host institution's:

### **Research Strategy & Research Themes**

- Connection to your project

### **Research Infrastructure**

- Expertise
- School / Centre where you'll be based & its research culture & network
- Research centres / institutes & networks
- Individual researchers
- Annual conferences / events
- Cross-sector and/or Knowledge & Impact expertise

### **Research Support**

- HR
- Finance
- Research Office
- Exploitation and Communication
- Training
- Commercialisation
- Resources (library, labs, IT etc)

It is advisable that you reach out to your host institution early. As soon as you've identified a potential mentor or host department/School, get in touch with them to start a conversation about their support and contribution to your fellowship as well as to enquire about any potential internal deadlines or selection processes. For some schemes, the host's commitment is essential to the success of an application and the application documents require a letter of support from a representative of the institution that signals the availability of resources; their commitment to realising your potential; confirming access to work space and mentoring support. The table below can assist you to reflect on the synergies and mutual benefits. Note: Examples are included to assist you in filling this out.

	INSTITUTION	YOUR PROFILE & RESEARCH STRATEGY	YOUR PROJECT
University Research Strategy	<i>[e.g. host's key research themes/ strengths &amp; wider strategy]</i>	<i>[e.g. your research &amp; publication profile and career goals such as seeking to gain research independence in the field]</i>	<i>[e.g. research fields and connection to host's strategy]</i>
Research Strengths	<i>[e.g. networks / research centres; international networking opportunities; individual research groups etc]</i>	<i>[e.g. your network &amp; collaborators that you'll bring to the institution; new expertise you seek to develop via host]</i>	<i>[e.g. research area / field; dissemination plans via networks &amp; conferences]</i>
Research Infrastructure	<i>[e.g. interdisciplinary research seminar series; connections with individual scholars &amp; initiatives &gt;&gt; where can you contribute &amp; how do these infrastructures benefit your project?]</i>	<i>[e.g. work of relevance to particular research groups; mentor expertise beneficial for networking &amp; leadership development; work speaks to degree programmes &amp; MSc dissertation supervision opportunities]</i>	<i>[e.g. interdisciplinary elements that benefit from host's clusters &amp; individuals for exchange &amp; feedback; &gt;&gt; connection to communication &amp; dissemination plans]</i>
Project Management Support	<i>[e.g. HR; Finance; Research Office; relocation support; International Office; IT; Ethics &amp; Integrity]</i>	<i>[e.g. aim to develop project management skills for future projects]</i>	<i>[e.g. project requirements; expenditure &amp; reporting mechanism; ethics &amp; data management]</i>
Resources	<i>[e.g. state-of-the-art laboratory; archival collection; heritage partnerships]</i>	<i>[e.g. access to sources &amp; resources available at host for project]</i>	<i>[e.g. local /regional focus; reliant on sources available at host]</i>
Training	<i>[e.g. leadership training opportunities; mentoring schemes; impact &amp; public engagement training; language courses relevant to project; PgCAP]</i>	<i>[e.g. develop leadership skills; public engagement skills for project deliverables]</i>	<i>[e.g. collaborations; knowledge exchange activities; commercialisation etc]</i>

## APPLICATION FORMALITIES

Once you've drafted your application, make sure to share it with at least 3 different people and get feedback. It's advisable to share your application with experts and non-experts in your field to ensure that a lay person can understand your application.

When you're happy with the content, do pay attention to the format as well. Don't cram too much information in and make sure that your application is easy to read. Ensure that you adhere to any style guidelines in terms of length, font size and spacing. Other formatting considerations include:

- avoid jargon and aim for clarity at all times;
- cross-check the language in your application against the Guide for Applicants and use their language (ie if they refer to the applicant as 'Experienced Researcher' use that term; if they evaluate your project by how you 'advance' the field, then signal clearly in your literature review where your project advances XYZ);
- make use of bold to emphasise your achievements or highlight key points for the reviewer;
- use tables where possible to communicate more effectively;
- proof-read for typos.

## THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Before you submit your application, it is advisable that you cross-check one more time the evaluation criteria to ensure that you've addressed all points. Remember that evaluators are likely working through dozens of applications, and they will tick off the criteria as they read through. To ensure you meet the criteria, it's worth checking the funder's website to see whether they give any details about the assessment criteria, and they may also publish their reviewer and panellist guidance.

Some schemes – such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships – have multiple stages to their evaluation process and, if you make it through initial rounds, include an interview. If you reach that stage, it's advisable to get as much support in preparing for the interview as you can. Careers Consultations or services may offer the opportunity to do a mock interview as well as at School or College level of your chosen host institution.

**TOP TIP** for interviews:

**Try to arrange a mock presentation and/or interview with senior colleagues, peers, and mentors.**

### A Note on Mobility

Mobility is often considered a great advantage on the CV. However, mobility might not be possible for every researcher due to their personal circumstances and fellowships don't always include funds for visa or relocation which further enables the able-bodied and privileged. Funders are increasingly acknowledging the diversity among the researcher community and some schemes will give space for addressing personal circumstances. Do take the opportunity to use that space. Equally, moving institutions or countries does not always make sense; again, it is best to not leave any room for interpretation but justify your decisions. Be in control of the narrative! Keep in mind that mobility can also mean to move from one discipline/Department/School to another.

### A Note on Interdisciplinary Applicants

For interdisciplinary applicants it might be advisable to choose funding schemes that explicitly invite interdisciplinary applications such as the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships. If you are applying to a discipline-specific scheme, reach out to the research office and/or funder to enquire whether your project meets their criteria to avoid disappointment.

Interdisciplinary researchers and research projects are often warmly encouraged by funders (though interdisciplinarity can prove tricky in terms of academic recruitment for lectureships). To ensure that your application is being evaluated by the best possible panel members, do take a moment to consider in which discipline you make the most significant innovation. If your chosen fellowship scheme operates via an online submission platform, it

is advisable to submit your project-related keywords early on rather than closer to the deadline so that the funder may form a panel with expertise in your area.

It is crucial that your application makes sense to reviewers from different disciplines. Do make sure you share your draft application with senior colleagues from research fields that are not relevant to your project.

**TOP TIP**

Check out [#Interdisciplinary Conversations with Prof. Catherine Lyall](#) that includes a section on '[Dynamics of evaluation panels is key for evaluation](#)'. You can also join the University of Edinburgh's SharePoint for [Interdisciplinary Research](#).

## Common Strengths and Weaknesses in Proposals

The Edinburgh Research Office has compiled a list of strengths and weaknesses commonly found in fellowship applications.

### Strengths:

- outstanding proposal that is world-leading in Scholarship, originality, quality, significance and importance;
- convincing case that the fellowship has outstanding leadership and transformative potential (commensurate with applicant's career stage);
- proposal activities (both leadership and research) are proactive and innovative;
- management arrangements are clear, convincing, and feasible;
- value for money, reasonable resources requested, appropriate resources requested;
- Strong and clear institutional support for leadership development of the fellow, as well as fitting in with institutional / departmental Research & Knowledge Exchange strategies.

### Weaknesses:

- has unsatisfactory levels of originality, quality and / or significance;
- flaws in conceptualisation, design, methodology;
- contains insufficient evidence and justification for the proposal;
- displays limited potential to advance the research field;
- potential outcomes / outputs do not merit the levels of funding sought;
- is unconvincing in terms of its management arrangements to deliver the proposed activities;
- displays inadequate institutional support;
- does not make a convincing case that the proposed fellowship has leadership and transformational potential (commensurate with the applicant's career stage);
- contains insufficient proposals for relevant collaborative activities.

## TRUTHS ABOUT REJECTIONS

It is a truth universally acknowledged that behind every applicant lies a rejection.

Rejections sting. Disappointment, disillusionment, frustration (and, depending on 'Reviewer 2', anger) – those are understandable, appropriate, and common first responses when the 'Thanks, but no' notification lands. Hours of labour and sweat (and often last-minute approvals or supporting documents) have gone into the submission. You've imagined yourself at your host institution, starting the project that you've carefully planned out in your application. All that labour in vain, you might think. Not so!

Fellowships – just like research grants – are highly competitive. Because the emphasis of the fellowship is on the person, a rejection may feel more personal perhaps than a grant rejection. But the list of excellent applications is simply longer than the pot of funding allocated can afford. For instance, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellowships award a 'Seal of Excellence' to any applicant that scores over a certain percentage but didn't quite make the funding threshold. For the unsuccessful applicant that is little consolation, but it should give re-affirmation that the application is strong. Don't let that deter you from trying again or trying through a different scheme. Any unsuccessful application is a first draft for a new application, either for re-submission (if the scheme allows) or for further project development.

The labour that goes into fellowship applications is active research time. The activity of writing such an application demands that you reflect on your career stage and develop a research strategy for you and your project; it also invites you to develop a research project. To work through the 3 Ps of an application means that you have identified and most likely liaised with a potential host institution, mentor, or project partner. These contacts may lead to invitations to seminars, publications, or future collaborations. Detailed project proposals also enable you to identify research activities or training needs you can apply for small pots of funding for to build your funding and research profile.

Don't forget that every fellowship application is an opportunity to reflect on career goals, to develop time and project management skills, and to shape your research projects and research strategy.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

For prospective applicants at /or to the University of Edinburgh

### Edinburgh Research Office

- [Early Career Research Fellowships & Grants](#) (2020-21 Guide, log-in required)
- Al Innes, '[How to Write a Fellowship Application](#)' (log-in required)
- [Research Learning and Development website](#)
- Various Resources incl. College Research Office Links & Engagement for Impact Hub on this [Sharepoint site](#)
- [Competency Framework for Research Funding](#)

### Information Services' Research Data Service

- [Templates & Support to write your Data Management Plan](#)

### Biological Sciences

- gives a [comprehensive listing](#) of externally funded fellowship schemes

### Institute for Academic Development

- [Workshops for Research Staff](#) on
  - o 'Developing a Funding Profile'
  - o 'How to Write your First Fellowship Application'
- [1:1 Career Development Consultations & Mock Interviews](#)

### Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities

- [Fellowship Programmes](#)

### Edinburgh Earth Initiative

- [Earth Fellowships](#)

### Research Staff Hub

- [Fellowships](#) section

### Other Resources

Advance HE – [Support for Fellowship Applications](#)

UKRI – Guidance for Fellowship Applicants  
[Guidance for fellowship applicants – UKRI](#)

UKRI – Principles of Assessment and Decision Making

[UKRI-310321-Principles-of-Assessment-and-Decision-Making-V2.pdf](#)

Dr Alison Garden's #ECRDay2022 – [Videos on British and Irish Postdoctoral Fellowships Schemes & other resources](#) – Queen's University Belfast, Postdoctoral Development Centre

Dr Alison Garden's [Academic Advice Guides](#) on Marie Curie & UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship applications & other schemes

Sara Shinton, '[Fellowship Interviews – Panel Insights](#)', Research Staff Blog, IAD, University of Edinburgh, (15 May 2020).

Emily Woollen, [#Interdisciplinary Conversations with Prof Catherine Lyall](#)', Research Staff Blog, IAD, University of Edinburgh, (15 May 2020). [includes resource list]

Imperial College London – [Fellowship FAQs | Administration and support services | Imperial College London](#)

Imperial College London – [List of Fellowship Opportunities by Discipline Area \(ECR\)](#)

Royal Holloway – [Example of an Excellent Post-Doctoral Fellowship Application](#)

Royal Society – [Top Tips for Preparing Your Early Career Research Fellowship Application](#)

University of Leeds – [Resources on Fellowships](#) (some open access)

University of Glasgow – [Guide to Fellowship Applications](#)

Queen's University Belfast – [Postdoctoral Development Centre's Fellowships Resources](#)

Queen's University Belfast – [9 'Pop Up' Training Videos on Fellowship Applications](#)

Yale University – [Guidance on Writing Fellowship Proposal](#)

## **UK- Funders**

[UK Research & Innovation](#) (UKRI)

[Arts and Humanities Research Council](#) (AHRC)

[Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council](#) (BBSRC)

[Economic and Social Research Council](#) (ESRC)

[Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council](#) (EPSRC)

[Innovate UK](#) (business-led innovation)

[Medical Research Council](#) (MRC)

[Natural Environment Research Council](#) (NERC)

[Science and Technology Facilities Council](#) (STFC)

[The British Academy](#) (BA)

[Wellcome Trust](#)

[Leverhulme Trust](#)

[Royal Historical Society](#)

[The Royal Society](#)

[Royal Society of Edinburgh](#) (RSE)

## **EU Funders**

[European Research Council](#)

[Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions](#)

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