

From Conference to 5k: Getting Started with Bidding for Funding

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Abstract

This brief and somewhat lighthearted guide is designed for colleagues who have never bid for funding before but think they might like to give it a try. It may also be of use to those who have had bids rejected in the past and, becoming disheartened, have not persisted with the task. The process is described as analogous to the systematic approach to developing fitness that is referred to in the phrase "From Couch to 5k", that is going from your inactive couch focused life, to running 5 kilometres. Much like training for a race in order to be successful at bidding you will need to want to do it. However, the desire is not a sufficient condition for success. In this contribution we draw on our bidding experience to suggest what the other essential elements might be. We share lessons we have learned, and we suggest some potential places where Irish colleagues might begin to seek funding particularly to support teaching and learning related activity. The guidance is aimed specifically at those who are inexperienced in this aspect of academic work and is thus at a basic but systematic level to help with the beginning of the journey from Conference to 5k.

Keywords: Bidding, grant writing, career development, collaboration.

* URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/364>

Introduction

This brief guide is designed for colleagues who have never bid for funding before but think they might like to give it a try. It may also be of use to those who have had bids rejected in the past, and becoming disheartened, have not persisted with the task. In this contribution we draw on our bidding experience, we share lessons we have learned, and we suggest some potential places where Irish colleagues might begin to seek funding to support teaching and learning related activity. We welcome responses that might add to and build on this work, and that reflect its tone which we intend to be practical, collegial and inspiring.

Getting started – why not and why

A good project needs a good title so we are calling our guide “From Conference to 5k”. Starting with bidding for funding is somewhat analogous to the systematic approach to developing fitness that is referred to in the phrase “From Couch to 5k”, that is going from your inactive couch focussed life to running 5 kilometres. Much like training for a race, or just trying to fulfil your own personal training goal, in order to be successful at bidding you will need to *want* to do it as it will take time. It is essential to realize this at the outset as there are a limited number of hours available to us in each day. That is not going to change. Whether it is additional time that you have to find, from outside your established pattern or time that you will take away from other activities within that pattern, bidding for funding takes time. It will require persistence and tenacity. It will require practice,, and it will most likely involve failure along the way and it will be hard work over an extended period.

Lest we succeed in dissuading you from the task rather than supporting you in your efforts in addition to the challenging learning associated with the work, and you will undoubtedly have learned and experienced new skills and proficiencies along the way, there will be more conspicuous positives: it can be satisfying if you are successful. Colleagues may recognise and celebrate your achievement; you may feel inspired to go on to attempt larger goals, and you will find that you connect or perhaps reconnect with colleagues with whom you may develop highly productive links in the future.

In terms of one's career, it is our view that bidding for funding may be helpful in at least three significant ways:

- it may be something that your department, your institution or other stakeholders value and hence it may be rewarded through recognition, through additional support for your work, or ultimately through progression (across the lifetime of a career);
- securing funding can bring both greater depth and breadth to your work in that it can expand the opportunities within your career to pursue that which are you passionate about, to connect with other colleagues, to contribute, and to travel in order to share your ideas and work with colleagues in other places;
- the discipline of refining and expressing your proposed project or study will of itself help you to focus your work, define the research or practice you wish to develop and assist you in recognizing the goals and outcomes you wish to achieve.

Even if your ultimate goal is to secure millions in European funding, you will have to begin with a small and manageable project; you cannot be on your couch one day and successfully run a marathon the next. Continuing the fitness metaphor, we are suggesting an easily paced approach that will allow you to build up your skills, and move up in scale overtime as you become more experienced.

Beginning with a conference

A good place to start is to achieve some funding to attend a conference or contribute to a workshop or seminar. Some departments will provide colleagues with support to attend a conference if they are presenting. In addition, some conferences offer scholarships or travel grants particularly for early career researchers to attend events. Naturally for small amounts of money (a few hundred euro for example) the bidding process will not be too arduous but it will involve the same basic principles that one will draw on when making submissions for larger grants in the future and in this respect it is a good start and good practice. You may be

able to identify where this sort of funding exists, but, equally, you may need to *ask* about support; not all support is widely advertised or easy to find. Getting into the habit of being aware of or seeking out funding is part of the learning to bid process. This may involve asking conference organisers about funds they have to support early career researchers, asking colleagues if they know of support to attend various events, and finding out from your own department if they or the institution provides support for work of this nature. It may be the case that both the department and the institution has some budget for this work. Therefore an early task will be to identify what is available and who to ask about it.

There are a number of benefits to beginning with something as small as a travel grant. Firstly, it is about a new mindset that confirms that making grant applications is something you can do and something that you do successfully. The small steps from the couch to the street do not seem like major achievements on the fitness journey but they are the foundation of the whole journey. Secondly, as the old adage says, nothing succeeds like success. The small success of securing a modest amount of funding to participate in a specific conference, seminar or national or international meeting is a success and will help you to build confidence in your ability to secure funding.

Moving to 1k

Bidding for €1000 will probably involve more effort than that which is required to secure a few hundred euros to present at a conference or participate in a summer institute. This is likely to be more work and more complex work. For this reason, we have chosen an approach which might be characterized as offering a worked example. Our example is in the area of teaching and learning in higher education but the basics will apply across a good range of discipline and professional areas.

As a step by step illustration what this type of application could look like we will draw on the recent call from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Every year the National Forum has a call for proposals for the 'National Seminar Series'. In this call the Forum outlines that the National Seminar Series 'gives those working in higher education the opportunity to connect with colleagues and to focus on shared interests in both the research and practice of teaching and learning enhancement. The series

also creates opportunities to hear from national and international experts in different areas of teaching and learning'. As with many funding calls the Seminar Series has a theme and a number of funding streams; this year the Forum's call has six funding streams, the details of which appear here <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/current-calls/national-seminar-series-20182019/>

The Forum's call clearly outlines the eligibility and selection criteria for the seminar series. It is essential to devote some time to each of these as nearly all calls will have these kinds of conditions associated with them. Time spent at reading the guidance offered by the grant awarding body will be some of the most productive time you spend – whether the application turns out to be successful or not. It will ensure that you establish eligibility, relevance and conditions before you start putting an application together.

In this particular example, 'eligibility' requires that you be from an institution which is associated with the Forum (they provide a list of these) and that the application must have the support of the institution. In other calls eligibility might be to do with your career stage, it could be geographical, might be based on achievements or prior experience, could be concerned with the funding theme or stream, or indeed might depend on your established or potential partnerships or networks. Establishing your eligibility to apply is always essential. Likewise, securing the support of your institution is often (but not always) a requirement as many applications require the approval of a senior institutional officer. Hence one of the first things you should do if you intend to bid for funding is to discuss the idea with your head of department; following that conversation you may find that you need to record an 'expression of interest' with your Research Office with regards larger bids.

Once your eligibility has been established, carefully considering the selection criteria will prove time very well spent. By outlining these criteria the funding body is telling you how they will judge the applications that they receive. In some instances, funding bodies are inundated with applications and reviewing these while often interesting, can be particularly time-consuming. With your audience in mind, therefore, your application should clearly explain how your proposal fulfils the selection criteria; this allows reviewers to identify easily the merit of your idea and its close connection to the funding call.

In addition, before you decide to bid, check what you can and cannot do with the funding. Most funding bodies are specific about how their grants can be spent. If you are unclear about how the funding can be used, but you are interested in bidding, you should contact the organization that has issued the call and seek clarification.

While following these steps cannot guarantee a successful application it will help to ensure that you use your time bidding for funding for which you are eligible, which will allow money to be spent on the activities that are pertinent to your work and will assist you to write your application in a way that demonstrates its suitability for funding.

Hitting the halfway mark – bidding for 2.5k

Though experienced colleagues may be bidding for very substantial grants through European funding streams, there are ways of accessing European support that are not complicated or demanding. One of the most accessible routes for an individual is the Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM). This is a networking tool associated with COST funding. The term COST is an abbreviation for European **C**ooperation in **S**cience and **T**echnology, but funding is not restricted to the natural sciences or technologically based disciplines. COST Actions (the name given to COST 'projects') are:

a flexible, fast, effective and efficient networking instrument for researchers, engineers and scholars to cooperate and coordinate nationally funded research activities. COST Actions allow European researchers to jointly develop their own ideas in any science and technology field.

All COST Actions use a range of networking tools to help them to achieve their objectives and many COST Actions employ the STSM tool. COST documentation indicates that:

Short-term scientific missions (STSM) are exchange visits between researchers involved in a COST Action, allowing scientists to visit an institution or laboratory in another COST country. They are aimed at fostering collaboration, sharing new techniques and infrastructure that may not be available in other participants' institutions or laboratories. STSM are intended especially for young researchers.

Similar to other grants, STSM have eligibility rules, selection criteria, and limits in terms of the support available: the STSM grant is a fixed financial contribution which is generally up to a maximum of €2500 but this amount can be increased to a maximum of €3500 under certain

circumstances for Early Career Investigators (ECIs). Though applying for an STSM will take some time, and will involve registering within the COST system, the scheme does have good flexibility in terms of the potential range of proposals. In addition, some COST Action STSM co-ordinators will respond to initial pre-submission enquires and will help applicants to manage the process of bidding.

Besides the learning associated with bidding for this type of grant, and the potential to have one's short term scientific mission funded, connecting with COST Actions is an excellent way to begin to interact with European funding more broadly and to start to consider greater involvement in work of this nature. Information about STSM is available on the COST website here http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/networking and through individual Actions, for example, <http://www.werelate.eu/events-networking-tools/> and <http://rosenetcost.com/short-term-scientific-missions-stsms/>

Achieving your goal – bidding for 5k

If you have moved through the previous or similar stages and feel you have gained a modicum of experience in writing and submitting funding proposals, or if you intend to collaborate with others, you may now wish to consider submitting for funding in the order of €5000 and above. For the purposes of illustration we have picked two different sources of grants and/or scholarships that award circa 5000 euro. These are: The Ireland Canada University Foundation <http://www.icuf.ie> and The Teaching Council <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Research/Research-Support-Framework/>

If you access each of these websites you will see that they offer 2 – 3 streams of funding under a general broad heading. As with the smaller grants, each of these organizations offers information on eligibility, the criteria against which they will judge proposals, closing dates, how the funding can be used etc. They also provide links to the application process and the relevant application forms, which may involve setting up a profile and submitting online. This is something where care is needed across all funding calls; where one needs to create a profile or submit online, or both, applicants need to be careful not to get tripped up by the technology. Apply in good time, making yourself familiar with the system so that the final application will proceed without difficulty. Do not leave it until the day of the deadline. You need a margin for error. Moreover, the application system may well be overloaded as the deadline approaches because many applicants have not heeded this exact advice.

Some funds require, or deem as desirable, collaboration or networking; certain calls may have collaboration as an eligibility requirement as in the case of the Teaching Council funding where one of the strands is for 'groups, teams or networks', others may note that one should be prepared to build that relationship if the funding is awarded. Where collaboration of any kind is either required or desirable for a funding call this adds richness and complexity to the application and the execution of the project. Collaborative projects can certainly achieve more but their management takes a good deal longer and issues associated with communication and institutional culture tend to come to the fore. Giving consideration to these matters as part of the discussions that lead to the submission may well save work and stress if successful. As serial collaborators, we actively encourage colleagues to network and connect when bidding for funding mindful of the caveat to start small and gradually work your way up.

Approaching the finish line

In our experience, bidding for funding has certainly meant a lot of hard work and late nights (especially coming up to a deadline), a measure of frustration and some disappointments. However, the combined downsides have been significantly outweighed by the benefits of securing funds through successful bidding. And, despite any success we have had, we have also learned not to just follow the funding. It can be tempting to apply for everything for which you are eligible, even tangentially, especially if you have had some measure of success but remember that once you are awarded the funds you will be expected to do the work and that work should connect with your and your department's goals. Being 'busy' at irrelevant work is unenjoyable, frustrating and it draws you away from other better uses of your time.

Below, we have set out a list of weblinks that we think you may find useful in your "fitness for bidding" journey and on future journeys, as you may wish to bid for larger projects with more significant sums of money attached. And, as with the 5k, don't give up. You will not always secure the funding that you bid for but if you believe it is worth it, then it is worth trying again.

Selected weblinks that you may find useful:

COST <http://www.cost.eu>

COST STSM http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/networking

Goldberg, Adam, 2016. *Getting research funding: is reading successful bids the answer?*
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/getting-research-funding-reading-successful-bids-answer>

Ireland Canada University Foundation – Scholarships

<http://www.icuf.ie/scholarships/>

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education – Seminar Series

<https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/current-calls/>

ROSENet STSM <http://rosenetcost.com/short-term-scientific-missions-stsms/>

Rowe, David, N.D. *A Guide to Bid Writing*

<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/media/Media,151059,en.pdf>

The Teaching Council - Research Support Framework

<https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/en/Research/Research-Support-Framework/>

Thomson, Pat, 2015. the ten habits of highly unsuccessful research bid writers

<https://patthomson.net/2015/04/27/the-ten-habits-of-highly-unsuccessful-research-bid-writers/>

W e R e L a T e S T S M <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WJhA9jjD7N9Uy2skfOCHvg-YUklcLHCs/view>