

Bridge Funding Proposal

Business Case

Nottingham UCU branch

Purpose:

The purpose of this document is to outline the case for making available six months bridging funding for University of Nottingham research staff who are on 'permanent' contracts with fixed-term underlying funding.



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1 Executive summary

In this document we set out the multiple ways in which the current precariousness of fixed term research funding has deleterious effects for the researchers¹ concerned, for the University, and for the public investment in research more broadly. Furthermore, we highlight how this situation undermines the University's commitments made under the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and the Athena Swan initiative.

We propose that the University make available 'bridge funding' of six months duration, for permanent research staff (i.e. staff with more than 4yrs continuous employment), who have reached the end of their fixed term project and have yet to secure subsequent funding. Benefits include:

1. Greater stability for research staff – University meeting its Research Concordat obligations.
2. Additional research income.
3. Additional REF-submittable units.
4. Increased capacity to retain talent, and cost savings from associated lower wage costs; fewer redundancy payments; and lower recruitment costs.

In ROI terms, calculations are inevitably dependant on assumptions used. If adopting a conservative position on potential costs (i.e. a 'worst case' scenario from the University's perspective) and not including secondary cost savings generated from point 4 above (which we lack data on), then a £2.1m investment in staff costs generates an £8.3m return in research funding, or £2.1m (using the assumptions detailed below) in research margins. In other words, with the data we have available we suggest this scheme would be cost neutral.

This proposal has been produced by two researchers at the University in their spare time, without access to University data, and should be evaluated accordingly. We, the authors, believe our own career trajectories to date support the arguments which follow – we have both benefited from a very rare level of security in our research careers at Nottingham thanks purely to our employment within the Horizon Institute which has secured – via two large block grants – ten years of continuous research funding. Without the 'soft money' this provided we would both have, at one or more points, been made redundant, and likely taken jobs either at other institutions or outside the sector. Having developed within this environment, including, crucially, building networks across and beyond the University, we are now securing our own funding successes at Nottingham – between us we have in the last 12 months secured 5 grants worth a total of ~£4m.

2 Strategic fit

First and foremost, as a research-intensive institution, the proposal supports the University's strategic goals by boosting research funding income, by putting in place an infrastructure to support proven researchers' funding activities.

We note that the University is a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, which includes the following:

¹ Where 'researchers' is used in the document it refers specifically to fixed term contract researchers, who conduct the bulk of University research.

Organisational systems must be capable of supporting continuity of employment for researchers, such as funding between grants, other schemes for supporting time between grant funding, or systems for redeploying researchers within organisations where resources allow. (2008: 8)

We also position our proposal in the context of VC West's commitments to addressing low staff morale, and in particular EDI issues:

I will be devoting a significant amount of attention in the next few months to equality, diversity and inclusion (ED&I) in terms of both staff and student recruitment and experience, and staff career progression. Beginning in the new year, I have asked Professor Marion Walker, our Associate PVC for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, to sponsor a project to look at our practices and behaviours around recruitment of staff from an ED&I perspective. (VC's blog, 2017)

3 Current situation

Research careers are marked by a high level of insecurity. This insecurity is a product of the UK funding landscape, which allocates resources on a targeted basis commonly for a period of between one to three years (up to a maximum of five years in exceptional situations). The insecurity is unfortunately heightened by a relatively recent change that RCUK projects start within 3 months of securing funding, rather than the 6 months previously. Given the arbitrary scheduling of funding calls, and the low rates of success, there is no way in which researchers can ensure that current and future funding are concurrent.

For the research staff who conduct the great majority of the work on any project, the result is the last 12 months of any project involve an increasing redirection of attention away from the current project and towards subsequent funding possibilities. In practice one of three outcomes is common:

1. Subsequent funding is secured by the researcher/their team in good time, and any synchronisation problems with end and start times are fudged – if short overlap the researcher may become shared on both, if a short gap the researcher may be funded in the interim by soft money the department finds in their budget.
2. Subsequent funding is not secured in good time and the researcher is made redundant. In some cases, the researcher is held over by soft money from their PI or department.
3. Subsequent funding is found 3-9 months prior to the end of a project (either in the same institution or another). The researcher moves on due to the imperative for continual employment. The first project then suffers due to loss of manpower, final project outputs can be detrimentally impacted. It is difficult to source another researcher for such a short duration (taking into account time for recruitment) and ultimately there is the loss of experience feeding into those final deliverables as the original researcher is lost due to the funding system.

The consequences of these three outcomes are, respectively:

1. In this, the best case scenario for both researcher and University, the researcher experiences heightened stress prior to the confirmation of subsequent funding. This contributes to the high levels of mental health issues amongst researchers found by two recent studies². The short turn around between funding success and project commencement mean that certainty is only likely to be available in the last few months of the project. This issue extends beyond negative mental health consequences for the researcher, to practical challenges for life planning, e.g. for female researchers, an inability to plan maternity leave; for all researchers, difficulty with obtaining mortgages. *Note: this issue applies to all three outcomes, but is even more pronounced for 2 and potentially 3.* For both parties, this base case scenario commonly results in data not being written up, with the result that the full public value of the work is not realised, and potential REF units are lost.
2. For the researcher, the negative consequences of unemployment are clear. In the best case scenario that they are maintained for a time by soft money, the nature of this source of funding means that it comes with considerable uncertainty (consequences of which outlined in 1. above). Prior to the end of their contract, there is a loss of focus on the job at hand as attention is redirected to job and funding applications. There is also the potential for quality slippage due to additional points of stress (applications, interviews, impending unemployment. For the University, the consequence of this outcome is the loss of an experienced researcher, whose skills have been invested in for several years.
3. For the University, the loss of an experienced researcher. This outcome can be particularly consequential for the project (and by extension REF units) because the researcher may need to leave at a key moment in the project, with the result that data does not get written up, and Impact opportunities lost. Funding bodies are increasingly interested in project partners maintaining the momentum of projects beyond the funded period, in order to increase Impact. If Nottingham's project members are not employed beyond the end of the project, the work to maintain momentum often falls to permanent academics, here or at partnering institutions. In the latter case, there is a risk that REF returnable activities and possible follow on funding are forfeited to competing institutions.

Regarding **key stakeholders**, whilst all research staff are affected by insecurity, it is notable that the most vulnerable are those groups – e.g. women, ethnic minorities, working class – who are already poorly represented in academic research, something which Nottingham has made a priority to address. Inevitably, those with the least resources to fall back on are most likely to leave the profession as a result of insecurity.

4 Options

The 'do nothing' option is to continue as is, with the consequences outlined above. We note that in practice a small number of researchers do secure soft money from their department to tide them over during periods between contracts, however this mechanism is piecemeal, which is to say its availability is dependent on the researcher's line manager and school rather than any specified, University-wide criteria. This leaves researcher's extremely dependant on the favour of their particular line manager (more so than is the case in any work hierarchy), which creates the

² <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/double-warning-impact-overworking-academic-mental-health>

conditions for abusive practices. For these reasons it is also of limited value in addressing researchers' sense of insecurity. We also note that this system generates administrative and emotional work for successfully PI's whose obligations to valued researchers results in them having to regularly shift money around to fill employment funding gaps.

We also note that in the University's Concordat Implementation Action Plan (2015-2019), compliance with the Concordat is claimed on the following basis:

Bridging funding, Past and current schemes (open to all disciplines) include,

- *Bridging the gaps: Next generation Feasibility Award*
- *UNICAS@GS and UNICAS sandpit and pumpprime funding UNICAS scheme*
- *Discipline bridging*

We are unable to source up-to-date information on 'Bridging the gaps' or "Discipline bridging", so presume they are defunct. UNICAS appears active, however that it is not intended for the purposes outlined here is reflected in the fact that its staff funding is only available to staff already employed until 31st July of the funding year.

The proposal advanced here cannot erase employment insecurity from the lives of researchers, but for those qualifying it will provide considerably greater certainty, whilst supporting University research activities.

4.1 Preferred option

To make available, for researchers reaching the end of a fixed-term permanent contract (i.e. those with >4 years continuous employment at the University), an up-to six month contract with the intention that this time be used to secure additional research funding and produce additional outputs. Should the researcher secure alternative funding during this period they would transition to it as soon as it was available. The period of time before this funding became available again to an individual could be a matter for further discussion.

We suggest that, formalised as part of the access to this funding, the researcher recipient is allocated time with a funding advisor with whom they will draw up a plan for the six months, showing how the funding situation is expected to be resolved. This would support the researcher, and give the University confidence that the funding is being used appropriately. Alternatively, we suggest this funding be available for producing additional REF units from unused data – though we expect in practice this will normally take place alongside funding applications, as it is not, in itself, a source of future funding.

We do not however suggest that this process is subject to review by a third party, or otherwise gatekeepered – our intention is to bring some certainty, and relieve researchers of pressures, not create new ones.

5 Expected benefits

The expected benefits comprise of improvements to research activities, and to staff wellbeing. In point 2 below, we set out our calculations of the cost of this policy. Due to incomplete data – some we do not have access to, some concerns future states which can only be estimated – the figures arrived at must be caveated. In calculating the costs and benefits, we have taken conservative assumptions (i.e. assumed higher costs and lower benefits). Note: the final figures also do not include several cost savings stemming from lower staff costs and recruitment costs through retention rather than external hiring, and from fewer redundancy payments. Combined with our conservative assumptions, we believe the proposal is likely to be cost neutral.

1. It would provide stability of employment in cases where external funding has been applied for but not yet allocated, or indeed has been secured but not yet started;
 - a. **Benefit:** quality of life, university meeting Concordat obligations;
 - b. **Benefit:** improved loyalty as researchers feel valued/ of worth rather than disposable
2. It would support researchers to develop follow on funding bids within the University rather than look elsewhere;
 - a. **Benefit:** maintaining already-invested-in research capacity in the university, retention of talent;
 - b. **Benefit:** significant additional research income. The following calculations use 2016 numbers for the University of Nottingham.
 - i. UoN research numbers: 251 RCUK bids³, 66 successful (26%), £40.9m research funding awarded;
 - ii. 182 qualifying⁴ Research staff are within 12 months of the end of their contract (Jan 2017 figures).
 - iii. Of the 182 who qualify, we assume 50% reach the end of their contract and apply for the full six months bridge funding. We expect this assumption is an overestimate but do not have access to data to better ground this⁵. In 6 months those 91 researchers could conservatively generate 68 bids (91x75% - allowing for some to collaborate on a single bid);
 - iv. Conservatively allowing for a lower success rate of 75% relative to existing bids, this is **£8.3m** in additional research income (if 251 bids = £40.9m; 68 bids = £11.08m x 75%=£8.3m)
3. It would give researchers the time to write up research data as publishable units, to the benefit of both their career development and the University's REF return;
 - a. **Benefit:** minimum 250 REF units: everyone has more data than time to write up, transition money would allow time for a minimum of one unit per researcher to be generated. REF rules mean these stay with the University even if the researcher subsequently leaves.
4. It would lessen the current pressure for researchers entering the final year of their contract to look elsewhere for work, which often results in posts being abandoned in the final stages of a project, to the detriment of it;

³ Due to lack of data, we have taken RCUK figures to be indicative of all funding sources.

⁴ 'Qualifying' here refers to Research staff with four or more years continuous service.

⁵ Calculating the take up of such a scheme is complex – HR may have some additional data that is useful here, but even in such a case, historical data is of limited use as the existence of the scheme itself might change decision making. The point we would emphasise here is that more important than absolute numbers is the cost-benefit ratio, which should remain unchanged at ~1:1. In other words, additional take up of the scheme should be balanced out by additional research income.

- a. **Benefit:** improved outputs from projects, better continuity and specialisation between related projects, maximised impact (which commonly comes at the end of the project).
5. It would make it easier for the University to recruit for projects internally rather externally, meaning lower wages costs which can be then reallocated elsewhere.
 - a. **Benefit:** lower staff costs, less resources wasted on recruitment process.
6. It would mean fewer redundancy payments for research staff reaching the end of fixed term contracts.
 - a. **Benefit:** lower staff costs.
7. It would support the University's efforts to improve employment practices under initiatives like Athena Swan and the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research.
 - a. **Benefit:** demonstration of Corporate Social Responsibility, marketing and communications
8. It would enable the University to differentiate itself from rival institutions when seeking to attract high-quality ECRs, and better equip the University to hold on to them.
 - a. **Benefit:** advantage in recruitment and retention of elite researchers.

5.1 Expected dis-benefits

There are no expected dis-benefits, however see Risks below. The financing model would mean a shift from school's using surplus funds to cover employment gaps, to central funding. We are not in a position to comment on the implications of this further.

6 Timescale

We expect the University would wish to trial this proposal on an interim basis, but this is for later discussion.

7 Costs

Based on figures we have received from HR, we understand the annual cost of underwriting *all* qualifying Research staff reaching the end of their contract for an additional six months to be £4.2m. Our calculations of benefits in 5.2 above assume 50% take-up, applying the same assumption here generates staff costs of this scheme of **£2.1m**.

7.1 Return on investment

Based on the calculations given in Section 5, 2b, we calculate that this funding would generate £8.3m in additional research funding. Obviously, this figure cannot be directly compared with the cost figure because much of this £8.3m is directly allocated to project costs. The margin the University secures on research bids is opaque, so again we do not have the necessary data here. If we make an assumption of 25%, then the margin is **£2.1m**, making the proposal cost neutral in direct financial cost-benefit terms – though again we emphasise that this calculation does not include secondary savings (see Section 5).

We emphasise that this proposal is not intended as a revenue generator, but a means of meeting several of the University's goals – greater research success, improved staff wellbeing, commitment to supporting underrepresented groups, adherence to Concordat and Athena Swan principles.

8 Risks

This proposal entails a shifting of *some* of the risk generated by the insecurity of research funding, away from individual staff members, to the University. We have attempted to quantify this risk, but greater certainty would require access to data we do not have. One such piece of data is the margin the University includes on research funding. It is also impossible to calculate with certainty the uptake of any such scheme with historical data alone, though as we set out in Footnote 5, the level of uptake is less important than the ratio between it and additional research income generation.

To conclude, we believe this moderate shifting of risk is appropriate in light of the corrosive effects this insecurity creates both on individuals, and on research outputs and impact, and would be a powerful demonstration of UoN's commitment to its staff, at a time when industrial relations – as VC West has herself noted – are at historic lows.