Collaborative Skills Development (CSD): Top Tips for Applicants

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Preparing your application

Read the application guidance fully!

You don't want to spend hours on an application that will be rejected outright because it's ineligible, so make sure you read the application guidance fully and check the eligibility criteria carefully:

- Make sure that you meet the eligibility criteria for applicants.
- Does your proposed project match the remit of the AHRC and the CSD scheme? Are all the activities you propose eligible to be included in your application? Keep referring to the call document to make sure your idea remains within its parameters. If not, you risk thinking yourself out of a successful application!
- Are all the costs you have listed eligible?

If you're not sure, get in touch with the AHRC.

Get Help…

Don't try to reinvent the wheel – there are plenty of people out there who've submitted lots of successful applications and who are usually happy to help!

- Always ask your supervisor, mentor or other experienced colleagues to read drafts of the application.
- Talk to the people within your university responsible for grant applications (e.g. Research Support Office): they have often dealt with hundreds of funding applications and their insights are invaluable. In particular, they can help you with the costing, point you to existing partnerships and introduce you to potential mentors.
- Research the projects that have been funded previously via the AHRC website. Explore their blogs/websites and think about how you can use any good elements in your own work.
- Consider recruiting a project committee, who can help you prepare the application and, if your application is successful, will share responsibility for delivering the project. It is often best to target people specifically, in addition to putting out an open call. It is also useful to know in advance what skills each committee member will bring to the project. If you are hoping to form an interdisciplinary committee, it is worth emailing supervisors in other departments to ask whether they know of any students who might be a good fit. It may be useful to over-recruit (by one or two people): inevitably levels of commitment will vary over the course of a project, and team members may face personal or work-related difficulties.

Writing your Application

Complete your application with the guidelines to hand.

- There will be specific points you are asked to address in each section of the application. Do not omit any of these, e.g. if the question asks which of the scheme's aims your project fulfils and how it will do so, provide exactly that!
- Where a section asks you to outline different aspects of your project, subheadings can be helpful both for you and for the reviewers.
- Think about the 'hook' for your project: what is it about this work that makes it distinctive, and will grab the imagination of funders and the public alike? Make explicit how your project addresses the scheme aims.
- Be clear in what the remit and aims of your project are: What do you propose to do and what will this achieve? What will the realistic outcomes be?
- Think carefully about who will benefit from your project and how you will reach them.
- What is the rationale for and role of the collaborators involved? Is there a reason for having collaborators from across the country or from only one particular region? (E.g. a programme that addresses 'niche' needs may be more viable if it is delivered across a number of organisations and can recruit from a larger cohort of students)
- Ensure your costing is realistic: Offer value for money, but work with actual quotes, not estimates. Don't forget any costs!
- Build some flexibility into the application to allow for unforeseen developments.
- Sustainability: think beyond your event or initiative, e.g. can you create a lasting online resource?

And if you're successful…

Running your project

Do not underestimate the amount of time involved in the management of a programme such as this: Start as early as possible!

- Manage your stress and time by delegating, and map out research days when you won't tackle anything related to the project.
- Delegate clear roles within a committee. Ensure that you have a treasurer with a firm grip on the purse strings; someone responsible for taking minutes at meetings (useful both in charting a project's progress and to ensure that everyone has a clear idea of what they are supposed to be doing, via action points); someone in charge of publicity; and a committee leader responsible for making final decisions and keeping everyone motivated.
- In the words of Voltaire, don't let the perfect be the enemy of good. Be prepared to be flexible in your thinking and allow the project to evolve and change as it takes shape. Make contingency plans and think about alternatives if your 'ideal' isn't possible.

Staying in touch…

Good working relationships and regular communication are vital, not just to the success of the current project, but also to its legacy.

- Agree from the start how your committee will stay in touch (Skype? Face-to-face meetings? How regular will these be?). Use dropbox or a similar tool to share files, meeting agendas, budgets etc.
- Set up a separate email account for project-related correspondence, rather than using a personal one.
- Always be polite, respectful and realistic in your requests, but do consider asking for people's support, advice and services. Often individuals are very willing to help and a request on the right side of cheeky has the potential to expand the scope of your project considerably. Face-to-face meetings are very important here!
- Keep people in the loop. It is important to keep partners and collaborators personally informed of progress. If you are emailed a question that you cannot answer immediately, send a holding email so that they don't get the impression they are being ignored.
- Thank people! This should include everyone who helps you, even if it is just to forward an email. For people who make a significant contribution, handwritten thank you notes are a nice touch and often the best way to show your appreciation. If not, a personal phone call or email can work.
- When you are working with external partners, bear in mind that they may have their own existing working practices which you'll need to find out about and be flexible around.

Publicity & Recruitment

- Establish a visual identity for the project early on. Develop several different logos and test out which one gets the best response. Remember: your logo will be on everything and if it looks sloppy you'll quickly grow to hate it! Be consistent in your choice of fonts and formatting, as this looks more professional and will help to create a project 'brand'.
- When designing publicity materials, think about which format best fits your project and budget. For example, a project aiming to widen participation in reading might use bookmarks instead of A5 flyers (plus printing costs will be lower!). Consider circulating digital posters to other institutions rather than hard copies.
- Sometimes the most effective form of publicity is actually getting out and talking to people. Talk to everyone—friends, colleagues, supervisors, and students—as this will raise the project's profile and increase the possibility of making beneficial chance connections. It is worth seeing if you can get a ten-minute slot to talk about your project at relevant conferences, or to present your ideas to different departments within your institution.
- Use social media throughout. If you have a blog, update it regularly. Rota in different committee members to contribute stories and invite guest bloggers. Remember that when writing for a public web audience, items should be short, easy to understand and visually appealing (through the use of images, headlines, block quotes etc.)

- Anticipate demand: Emphasising the popularity of your workshops will encourage students to sign up quickly to avoid losing out. If you fill all your places, start a waiting list in case anyone drops out.
- Emphasise the CV benefits: students will be reluctant to take time out of their PhD work unless they are convinced of the valuable skills that participation in your project will give them.
- Spread the net wide: consider whether students from other arts and humanities faculties might benefit from your project – perspectives from other disciplines may also enhance your discussions.
- Think about how you'll attract students from outside your institution: if you have a travel/subsistence allowance it may help to advertise this to encourage participation from other institutions.

Stretch the budget

- Wherever possible avoid using catering services and bring your own coffee, cake and biscuits!
- Cap travel expenses at the start to avoid unexpected bills. Organise car shares or use Skype to collaborate with people at other institutions.
- Take advantage of free web services such as Wordpress, Facebook and Twitter.
- Look out for opportunities to 'piggyback' on other events. For example, tagging on to an established university programme or getting involved in a local festival can help to bring in a broader audience, and may mean that publicity/catering costs are shared or covered.
- Take advantage of the wealth of in-house resources based at your universities: A volunteer coordinator might be willing to provide training or guidance on working with community partners; IT services might be able to make web space available; the external relations department should provide guidance on how to present your project to the public. The postgraduate community is also full of creative people who can provide semi-professional services at a more reasonable cost: trainee photographers, filmmakers and web-designers are often happy to help out for an honorarium and the experience.
- Get creative: if the project is performance-based, a gig or benefit can be organised to raise additional funds; look for additional pots of money, such as the university's Alumni Fund; even small scale fundraisers like a bake sale can help.

Format of events

- Participants get more out of hands on activities so be creative.
- Make sure there are plenty of opportunities for student participants to present/take part in panels etc. – don't let academic speakers take over!
- If you're having roundtable discussions think about the optimum number of participants that will allow everyone to have their say – don't crowd too many in.
- Don't try and fit too much into shorter events.
- Include networking opportunities – such as shared lunches or drinks receptions.

- Feedback and reflection time for participants during an event/workshop/conference are good, but it is possible to overdo it!
- Have realistic schedules – and don't be afraid to step in if presentations or discussions are running over time. On the other hand, in some cases, you may decide to extend sessions / tea breaks if people are having good conversations – consider how this will impact on the rest of your event and make sure everyone is informed of changes in the programme.
- Consider recording workshop sessions and then publishing this on a website or blog – this will give your programme a much greater reach.
- Choose a venue that reflects the ethos of your event.

Engaging the public

- Events/workshops aimed at the public may work better and attract wider audiences if held in public spaces, e.g. local museums/venues in city centres, rather than university venues.
- Public engagement training should be targeted and specific, e.g. if you are working with children you will probably need specialist advice on working with this group.
- Public Engagement activities are most helpful when students can understand the relevance to their own research – giving students the opportunities to evolve activities based on their research is most beneficial.

Evaluating your Project

- Get as much feedback as possible over the course of the project. Keep on top of the quantitative data, such as numbers involved, blog hits etc., in addition to the qualitative sound bites about how the project has impacted upon the people involved.
- If you can't evaluate your programme through standard questionnaires (this may apply at exhibitions or more interactive programmes), consider photos/videos/exit interviews.
- Take lots and lots of photographs at every stage of the project.

Legacy…

- Aim to recruit committee members at an earlier stage of their PhD who will be responsible for maintaining partnerships and managing the project's legacy after the funded period comes to an end.
- Have end-of-project meetings with partners, thanking them for their support and gauging whether they would like to continue working with you in the future, and in what capacity.
- Create partnerships and connect to existing networks inside and outside universities to ensure project legacy beyond the award.