PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

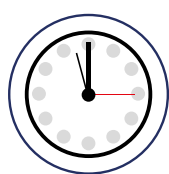## How to apply for fellowships

1. Introduction to fellowships

1.1 What is a fellowship?

A fellowship is a personal award to an individual researcher for starting their own independent research. This is a highly prestigious position offered to a researcher who demonstrates their aspirations to become a leader, has a strong track record of publications and ideas for novel research in their field.

The main benefits of receiving a fellowship include:

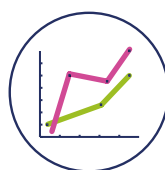**Focused time and support for independent research.**

Networking opportunities.

Recognition and credit for your research ideas.

Access to an organisation's resources and expertise.

Salary and contributions to your research and travel costs.

Creating a track record of successful funding.

Professional development opportunities to support your career progression.

For certain fellowships, international mobility, or support with returning to a research after a career break.

However, fellowships are highly competitive and require a lengthy application process. Applicants are expected to demonstrate the value and impact of their research and why they are the ideal candidate for funding.

1.2 Types of fellowships

There are several types of fellowships available to researchers. The main differences include their research budgets and the duration (ranging from one to eight years). Furthermore, fellowships are usually aimed at specific career stages:

- Early career fellowships allow applications from those who have recently finished their PhD or have a few years of postdoctoral research experience.
- Intermediate career fellowships usually support mid-career researchers who have the potential to become research leaders.
- Senior career fellowships are designed to support independent researchers to further develop their research.
- Principal research fellowships provide long-term funding and can lead to becoming a professor or director.

Furthermore, there are fellowships to support specific activities including re-entry into research after a career break (Daphne Jackson Fellowship and Wellcome Trust Career Re-entry Fellowship), supporting flexible working (Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship) international and cross-sectoral mobility (Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions Individual Fellowship), industry collaboration (Royal Society Industry Fellowship) and fellowships for international researchers to conduct research in the UK (Royal Society Newton International Fellowship and Royal Society Wolfson Visiting Fellowship).

2. Preparing for fellowship applications

2.1 What funders are looking for in an individual

As fellowships are personal awards, you should prepare for applications by ensuring you have all the skills and experience funders are looking for in an individual. This preparation should start well in advance of applying for fellowships, as you may want to consider taking part in additional work experience or other professional development opportunities during your PhD or postdoctoral research.

Skill	Why this is important for a fellowship	Ways to evidence
Funding	Having a track record of funding can demonstrate that you have experience with managing a personal award.	Start applying for grants, big or small, as early in your career as possible.
Independence	Fellowships aim to help you move into independent research. Therefore, funders will want to see that your research is different to that of your previous supervisors.	Start to broaden your research horizons as early as possible. For example, ask for time to work on your own 'Friday afternoon project', while doing your main work or write, and be lead author, on a review.
Leadership	Fellowships are designed to support future leaders in academia and accordingly, funders will want to see that you have experience with being a leader.	Organising conferences, supervising students, teaching modules, giving 'invited speaker' talks at conferences, taking part in an early career forum, outreach and public engagement work or holding a governance position.
Networks and collaboration	This can prove to a funder that you are ready for independent research and that your research proposal has a high chance of success.	Present your work at conferences, make research visits.
Research impact	This can include publications, patents, software development or policy. You will need to highlight your research impact on your application and explain your specific contribution to each activity. Most funding bodies follow the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) principles (including UK Research and Innovation and the Royal Society), meaning that they review publications based on scientific content rather than the identity or impact factor of a journal.	Start publishing, securing patents, developing software and affecting policy decisions. See our Publishing Fundamentals for support on starting your publishing journey.

The Microbiology Society supports a wide range of activities that can advance your career development and be used as specific evidence in your fellowship applications. For more details, see our other professional development resources.

2.2 Developing a research proposal

In the early stages of thinking about applying for a fellowship, you should spend some time planning your research proposal. Your project needs to be:

- Independent (different from the work of your previous supervisors)
- Novel
- Important, with societal or economic benefits
- Ambitious
- Feasible

To develop a research idea for your proposal you can:

- Think about current events happening during the time of the fellowship. If your project is addressing these, you can use this to create a sense of urgency and timeliness about the project (e.g. tackling AMR, climate change, pandemic viruses).
- Look at examples of successful fellowship applications in your field. Are there any trends in what is being funded? A quick search on the internet should provide some examples.
- Once you have an idea, think about why this is the right time for it. Are there new techniques, methodologies or collaborations to support it?
- Get feedback on your project ideas from colleagues at your institutes and mentors. Each round of feedback will help develop your project into a better idea.
- Start to connect with potential collaborators and use them to refine the idea.
- Generate pilot data to support the application. This is not essential but can be useful to demonstrate the feasibility of your project.

2.3 Fellowship opportunities

The best place to search for fellowships is directly through the website for each funding body. You should also stay up to date with their social media as they will usually announce when calls are open for a particular fellowship.
In the UK, the most prestigious and relevant funding bodies for microbiologists include UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Innovate UK (supports business-led innovation), Medical Research Council (MRC), Wellcome Trust and the Royal Society. Some universities and research institutes will also host their own in-house fellowship opportunities.

You may also want to consider EU funders as the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement following Brexit allows for UK researchers to receive funding from members of Horizon Europe, including the European Research Council, Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions and the European Innovation Council. Below are some examples of fellowships from these funding bodies:

Early career	Intermediate career	Senior career	Principle research	Specific activities
Wellcome Early Career Award BBSRC Discovery Fellowship MRC Career Development Award UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship Royal Commission 1851 Fellowship European Research Council Starting Grant	The Royal Society University Research Fellowship Wellcome Trust Research Career Development Fellowship Wellcome Trust and the Royal Society Sir Henry Dale Fellowship European Research Council Consolidator Grant BBSRC David Phillips Fellowship	Wellcome Senior Research Fellowship Royal Society and Leverhulme Trust Senior Research Fellowship	Royal Society Research Professorship Wellcome Principal Research Fellowship MRC Senior Non-Clinical Fellowship Wellcome Discovery Award European Research Council Advanced	Daphne Jackson Fellowships Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions Individual Fellowships Marie Sklodowska-Curie Actions COFUND Royal Society Newton International Fellowship Royal Society Wolfson Visiting Fellowship Royal Society Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship Royal Society Industry Fellowship Wellcome Trust Research Career Re-entry Fellowships BBSRC Enterprise Fellowship

Furthermore, you can search for fellowship opportunities on Research Professional if your university has an institutional subscription to their services.

2.3 Choosing the right fellowship

Fellowship applications can take a significant amount of time and effort and some funders do not allow for resubmissions. It is important you think carefully about what fellowship is right for you before you apply. The main considerations you should have when looking at a funding scheme are the remit, eligibility, application requirements, funding and duration.

○ **Remit**

The remit refers to the research which the funding body supports. You should always check that your research proposal falls within the remit of the funding body offering the fellowship to make sure that your project is eligible for funding. When investigating a specific funding body you should ask:

- What disciplinary field does this funding body support?
- What is the mission of this funding body?
- Does this funding body have any priority topics they are looking to fund?
- What is the strategic plan for the funding body over the next few years?
- Is the fellowship/funding body looking to fund fundamental or translational research?
- What projects have been funded by this funding body in the last year?

It is worth having in-depth understanding of the funding body before applying for a fellowship, to make sure your proposal can be funded and so that you can tailor your application, giving it the best chance of success.

○ **Eligibility**

As demonstrated in the previous section, fellowships are designed for specific career stages, or to support specific activities. The eligibility criteria for a fellowship are usually defined as:

- The number of years since your PhD.
- The number of years of postdoctoral experience required.
- Nationality (UK, EU or International).
- Whether you currently have a permanent academic position.
- Whether you have previously had a similar fellowship.
- Whether you research proposal matches the funding body remit.
- If the fellowship is aiming to support a specific activity (e.g. return from a career break).

Understanding your eligibility can help to narrow down the fellowships you can apply for. If you are unsure about your eligibility, it is always best to reach out to the funding body to confirm this before you apply.

○ **Application requirements**

For each fellowship, you should aim to understand the application process very clearly before you apply. To do this you should review each application with the following questions in mind:

- How do I submit an application?
- What information do I need to provide for an application?
- What is the deadline, and do I have enough time to write an application?
- How long does the whole application process take (i.e. time from submission to award)?
- What is the assessment process for an application?
- What support is available to help with the application?

If you have any questions about the application process, it is best to reach out to the funding body directly. Alternatively, if you are associated with a university they may have support services for fellowship applications.

○ **Funding/duration**

The funding a fellowship offers is an important part of deciding if a fellowship is right for you. You should consider:

- What are the research expenses and is this sufficient for your research proposal?
- What is the salary provided?
- What is the duration of the fellowship?
- Are contributions to travel and conferences provided?
- Does the funding include relocation or visa costs, if needed?

○ **Other considerations**

Beyond the specific requirements for you and your research proposal to be eligible, you should also think strategically about whether this fellowship is right for you. Ask yourself:

- Am I going to be competitive for this grant at my current career stage?
- Will getting this fellowship support the career path I want?
- Is there family or disability support, if needed?
- What training and support for professional development does the fellowship provide?
- Will this support my re-entry into academia?
- Will the fellowship help with my relocation internationally?

2.5 Getting institutional support

Identifying an institute that will support your application, and knowing their process, is very important. Universities may be limited in the number of submissions they can support, so the earlier you can do this, the better.
For some fellowships, a letter of support from your host institution is required for your application. This is usually written by the head of the faculty/department which you want to work in. You should build a connection with this individual as early as possible as an enthusiastic letter can convince the funding body that the institution is committed to assisting you during your fellowship.

Furthermore, this individual can be a great source of information about the department's research environment, facilities and expertise which will greatly assist when it comes to writing your application.
The institution will also have a process for submitting fellowships, that will require internal staff to review and potentially submit the final paperwork. You will need to work with them on this, to ensure they meet internal deadlines.

In addition, you need to ask the institution what they will provide in terms of support. For example, will international fees be paid by the institution; will they provide additional research expenses; will they provide mentoring and leadership training and what resources are available?

3. Writing a fellowship application

3.1 Assessment Criteria

Each funding body will have a specific set of assessment criteria, which you should always tailor your application to. This includes using the same language as the assessment criteria in your application to signpost important information to the person reading your application.

Generally, funding bodies will assess the three Ps (person, project and place) in your application.

○ **Person**

The funding body will be looking for evidence that you are the right person to receive this funding and carry out this research project. You should demonstrate:

- Evidence of independence (i.e. your research moves on from that of your previous supervisors).
- Evidence of your leadership skills and that you have the potential to be a future leader.
- A specific career plan, which this fellowship fits into and will support.
- A track record of research impact (publications, patents, software development, policy).
- Contributions to a positive and inclusive research culture.
- Research skills and collaborations which make you the best person to deliver this project.

○ **Project**

Your project needs to fit within the remit of the funding body. Furthermore, they will be looking to fund projects which demonstrate scientific excellence and research that will develop you into a research leader. Your project should demonstrate:

- Scientific excellence (well designed and supported by current research).
- Feasible outcomes within the timeframe of the fellowship.
- Detailed methodology.
- Novelty.
- Timeliness.
- Connections to the strategic plan of the funding body.
- Specificity to your skill set and experience.
- Thorough risk assessment and contingency plans
- Value for money (each cost is justified as to how it will maximise the outcomes from your project).

○ **Place**

The host institution for your project is also assessed to make sure it can appropriately support your professional development and your project. You should demonstrate:

- Professional development support.
- Research support (equipment, facilities, financial support).
- Reputation of the school/faculty/university.
- How the research will fit into the environment (strategic fit, collaborations, expertise, track record of similar research).
- Institutional support for your application.

However, if you have personal circumstances which restrict your choice of a host institution, you should make this clear on the application as a funding body should take this into account to make sure you are not at a disadvantage because of this.

3.2 Contents of a funding application

Each fellowship will have a specific list of requirements for your application in terms of format and documents. Make sure that you include all the information they require. Below is some guidance regarding sections that are often part of a fellowship application, although not all of these will be included in every fellowship application:

Summary	**A well written summary of your research in plain English. This should be able to be understood by a wide audience, including the public, policymakers and peer reviewers. You should focus on your objectives, why these are important, the potential impact of the research and how you will conduct your research.**
Technical summary	A technical summary should provide a summary of your research which can be understood by a reader who is an expert in your field.
Background	This sets out the context to your research. Here you can demonstrate your knowledge of the subject area, discuss research which has led up to your project and how your project will develop the research area. If appropriate, you may also want to include any pilot data you have obtained (although this is not essential).
Aims and objectives	Specify your research questions you want to investigate and why this is important. You should also address the expected outcomes from each research question you are proposing.
Methodology	This should explain how you will achieve each objective. You should be specific about your research design and methods to demonstrate that your project is feasible to an expert reviewer. It is good to identify any risks in your research and what alternative approaches you will take to demonstrate your flexibility. Your methodology section can also highlight any equipment and facilities that you will be using.
Milestones	Provide a timeline of the major milestones in your project to demonstrate what achievement you will make and when. This can be presented in the form of a Gantt chart. You should also refer to any alternatives you will need to take, if the risky aspects of your project fail, to demonstrate your project is well thought out.
Expected outcomes	This should detail all the expected outcomes of your research. Where possible, you should mention how these outcomes match the strategy of the funding body.
Dissemination plan	This is a detailed plan of how research findings and any other outputs from your research will be disseminated. This can include publications, presenting at conferences, public engagement (particularly important to charities who rely on public money to fund research).
Impact plan	An impact plan details the benefits that your research can have outside of academia and how you will realise this impact. When creating your impact plan, you should think about the potential stakeholders on your research, the benefits your research has to them, what actions and activities you can hold to engage them and how you can evaluate the success of this impact.
Justification of resources	Research councils request a justification of resources to demonstrate that the resources you are requesting for a project are appropriate. You should outline the resources you require, the cost of these, and justify how each resource will contribute to the success of the project. Costs usually fall under the following categories: staff (directly incurred posts), staff (directly allocated posts), travel and subsistence, other directly incurred costs and exceptions. For support on how to complete this, refer to guidance by UKRI.
Case for support	The case of support is requested by research councils and refers to the research content, background, aims and objectives, description of proposed activities and methodology, work plan, outputs and impact.
Letter of support	A letter of support can be submitted to confirm active collaborations, your contribution to a specific project or your support at the host institution.
Data management plan	This should provide a comprehensive plan for data management including data areas, types, standards and metadata, secondary uses, methods for data sharing, format, timeframes for data release and reasons why data sharing is not appropriate.
Ethical considerations and approval	For any studies involving human participation or animal models, you should identify and evaluate any ethical considerations and discuss how this will be managed. Make sure you familiarise yourself with the ethical requirements of the funding body and ensure you have met all of these.
Career development plan	This should indicate your training needs and discuss any activities you will undertake during the fellowship to develop this. You should also mention how these will benefit your future career path.

3.3 Style tips

- **Know your audience** – your application will be assessed by peer reviewers and a funding committee. This will be a mixture of individuals who are experts in your field and individuals who do not have any in-depth knowledge. You should aim to write for both audiences, being specific about your objectives and methodology but avoiding any jargon.
- **Tell a story** – highlight the problem your research is addressing, the impact on society and why this research is novel.
- **Make it exciting** – demonstrate why this research is important and why now is the right time for it.
- **Make it easy to read** – the key information should be easy to identify by scanning. To do this, signpost using the same language as the funding body's assessment criteria. You can also use headings, subheadings, bullet points, numbering, bold, underlined, italic text or tables, but use this strategically.
- **Stick to the word limi**t – consider what is most important about your application and prioritise this for space.
- **Check for typos** – get a friend, colleague, mentor or supervisor to read over your application and check for any mistakes.

3.4 Support for writing your application

Fellowship applications can be a daunting task to complete as an individual. However, it is important that you make use of several avenues of support to ensure your application has the best chance of success:

- Attend an information session. A funding body will usually run one of these when they open calls for a fellowship. This is a great opportunity to ask any questions you may have.
- Look out for training events at your university on fellowship applications.
- Your host institution will usually have support services for people applying for fellowships. Reach out to them as early as possible.
- Speak to a mentor for advice.
- Reach out to successful applicants for their advice.
- Make sure you get feedback on your application from more experienced colleagues, collaborators, mentors or supervisors.

4. The Assessment Process

Once you have submitted your application, it will start an assessment process. This can vary depending on the funding body and you should familiarise yourself with this before submitting your application. Generally, the application is peer reviewed, candidates shortlisted by a funding committee before interviews take place with a panel.

4.1 Peer review

Peer reviewers will evaluate your application against a list of specific assessment criteria from the funding body. Some will give you the 'right to reply' to these comments to allow you to clarify any confusion or address any weaknesses in your application.

The turnaround time for your response is usually short (around 10 days) but this will be specific to each funding body. You should respond to all points in detail and respectfully, even if you do not think their concerns are legitimate.

4.2 Funding committee

A funding committee will then review your application alongside the peer reviews and your response to these reviews. This committee will then rank your fellowship alongside any other applications. This will create a shortlist of candidates to interview.

4.3 Interview

Some funding bodies will request an interview with their shortlisted candidates. The interview will be conducted by a mix of experts in your field and members of the funding committee. The interview will usually involve a short presentation followed by questions from the panel.

○ Preparing for your interview

In your preparation, you should familiarise yourself with the aims and strategy of the funding body and study your proposal. Furthermore, you should base your preparation on the assessment criteria provided by the funding body or see the previous section on assessment criteria from this guide. From this, you should be able to formulate a list of potential questions from the body. These may include:

- Why are you the best person for this fellowship?
- What are your career objectives and how will this fellowship fit into this?
- What is your most important publication and why?
- When have you displayed leadership skills?
- What is your approach to managing people?
- What is the importance of this project?
- Who will benefit from this research?
- What risks are there in your project and how will these be managed?
- Why is your host institution well suited for this project?
- How can the institution support your professional development?

○ Delivering your presentation

For some interviews, the funding body will ask you to give a presentation. This is usually 5–10 minutes long and covers the objectives of your research and how the fellowship will support your career development.

When designing your presentation consider:

- Keep the presentation simple and to time.
- Tailor it to the knowledge level of the audience (a mix of expert and non-expert).
- Communicate the big picture (what is the problem, why it matters, what is your solution) rather than details of individual experiments.
- Stress the novelty of your work.
- Use pilot data to support your points.
- Include key takeaway points for the audience.

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