Developing a research proposal
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Workshop: Developing a research proposal

Colin McCaig
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Types of research proposal

1. Commissioned (or contract) research
   - aka 'reactive' research
   - research or evaluation

2. Regulated funding (Research Council or charity funded research, EU funding)
   - aka 'proactive' research

Overlapping principles
Some features of difference
Commissioned or contract research

- main funders are government departments, agencies
- HE sector bodies; some charities, pressure groups or voluntary sector bodies
- public competition for the work
- they issue *Expressions of Interest* and/or *Invitations to Tender* ... some use *Framework Agreements*
- can be research or evaluation work
- almost always about POLICY rather than pedagogy or practice
- sometimes known as 'applied research' as it is applicable to identified policy problems
Research or evaluation?

• Research is usually more open ended enquiry in response to a perceived problem, e.g.
  – 'Research into the causes of the BAME attainment gap in HE'

• An evaluation in the same field might be (e.g.):
  – 'Evaluation of the XXX CPD programme to counter unconscious racial bias in assessment'
Research or evaluation?

• Methods may be similar - but an evaluation tender will usually steer you towards which to use
• time scales may be similar (i.e. report within 9 months)
• funding for the work may be similar
• Range and scope likely to be far more open ended in a research project
  – evaluation is (usually) of a boundaried programme or set of questions
  – sometimes steered away from adjacent areas
Commissioners in WP/ HE outreach field

- Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (structural and market side of sector)
- HEFCE (operational side of sector)
- OFFA/SPA/UCAS
- UUK/HEA
- Mission Groups
- Sutton Trust/EEF
- The Edge Foundation
- The Bridge Group
- etc etc
Process

• Commissioners will decide an issue needs research / evaluation
• Issue the ITT
• 2-3 week turnaround
• How do you decide whether to go for it?
The research/evaluation commissioning context

- Knowing the field - government agendas, types of evidence they will be looking for
- Knowing how research is commissioned
- Knowing the funder and the policy context
- To bid or not to bid - a cost-benefit analysis
- Centre for Education and Inclusion Research at SHU [http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ceir/](http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ceir/)
## Looking out for tenders

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<th>Website</th>
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Bidding checklist (1)

• How close is it to established areas of expertise (methods and/or substantive area)?
• Do we have the capacity to undertake it?
• Do we have the expertise/experience etc required according to the client scoring scheme?
• What are the potential spinoffs (business, academic, partnership, developing an area of work; junior researchers)?
• How great is the likely competition, and who?
• What is the time frame for bidding? Estimate time to write bid - is it doable?
Bidding checklist (2)

- What is the budget - can we judge if it is doable by considering: timeframe; complexity
- Possible partners: do we need them; who should lead?
- Is there capacity to write the bid - lead; RA support; admin support?
- Is there capacity to do the work in the centre, faculty, university, beyond university?
- Who is going to do what?/when?
- Have we got administrative capacity?
Structuring the proposal

• Understanding the environment
• Who we are - track record in similar work for similar clients - the sales pitch
• Our approach - aims and objectives, research questions
  – Methodology and methods
  – Analysis
  – Timelines
  – Costing
  – Staffing (mini-CVs)
  – Risk assessment and QA/Data Protection
Scoring mechanism (HEFCE)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question subject</th>
<th>Maximum marks</th>
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<tr>
<td>Price</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding the environment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff and delivery of project</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project plan and timescales</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>30%</td>
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Thorny issues

Costing
- do you know the budget?
- daily rates
- is it VAT-able

Contractual - get the ITT terms/conditions looked at by 'legal'

Sub-contractual relationships
- who does what
- differential costs

Funder requirements
- liaison requirements
- reporting schedules
- dissemination
- Time - they always expect more than they will pay for
Methods and approach
Aims, objectives and methods: the primacy of research questions

Source: Maxwell (1996: 3-4)
Methods..?

- Research questions - who aimed at?
  - nature of subjects - recipients; practitioners; stakeholders; end-users
- sample/cohort size and nature
- variables anticipated
- complexity of data required: in-depth (qual) or yes-no (survey) statistical trial (RCT, quasi-experimental)
- validity and robustness = usefulness
- nature of funder: purpose, audience
- what do we want to get out of it?
Proactive research proposals

- Research councils [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/]
- [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/funding/research/]

- Large charitable bodies e.g. Leverhulme Trust [http://tinyurl.com/hyuq2uj]
- Sutton Trust [http://www.suttontrust.com/]
- Big Lottery Fund [http://tinyurl.com/hhggky6]

- Size of budget - variable (some small grants available e.g. SRHE £10k; big calls can have budgets of £5m)
- Research support office e.g. RIO at SHU
- What's different - time and budget
- Multiple partners - different ways of working
What else is different?

- **You** identify the issue, drawing on literature and theoretical underpinning of your choice
- Open calls - plenty of scope
- Multidisciplinarity and criticality encouraged
- Length of time you can take (to develop proposal and to carry out the research)
- Range of approaches and methodologies
What else is different?

- Freedom to shift direction within the budget
- Full Economic Costing
- More possibilities for publications
- Prestige in career and REF impact terms
- ... but hugely bureaucratic and time consuming (especially EC funding streams)
- Joint Electronic Submission system (Je-S)
Structure for a Research Council proposal

• Case for support
  – project objectives
  – project summary
  – academic beneficiaries
  – ethical information
  – impact summary (i.e. who on)
  – staff duties (and CVs)

• Pathways to impact (i.e. how it will impact research/policy community)
References
