



Staying in academia – How to apply for postdoc funding?

When you have earned your doctorate or you are at the second half of your PhD thesis, you probably already thought about your future career. If it comes to pursuing an academic career, you have to know how to acquire external funding for your research.

The workshop “Staying in academia – How to apply for postdoc funding?”, which was developed together with the Research Training Group 2300 ENRICO (Enrichment of European beech forests with conifers) and the input from the team of the Research and Transfer Services of the University of Göttingen addressed this urgent topic. Prof. Dr. Dominik Seidel, one of the principal investigators at the RTG 2300, shared his experiences with the participants and compiled the following advice for you.

10 hints on setting yourself on the “right” track for research funding:

1. Try, try, try... you can only score if you play the game! And experience comes from trying.
2. Avoid being overambitious. The main reason for rejection is an unfeasible work plan. Try to have a more linear progress visible in your milestone plan.
3. In your research try to make yourself a “brand” and find your niche: What is the piece of the puzzle you are adding?
4. Avoid being a “lonesome rider” – cooperation is often key: Try to collaborate with international partners. Make them yours and not your supervisor’s partners. Also the ability to cooperate should appear in your track record.
5. Try to make notes throughout your daily work on the issues you feel unanswered, find pattern and address them in your proposal. Also test your hypothesis against societal needs, for example looking at Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
6. Be aware that great inventions/ideas often arise in one brain only, but may have been stimulated through discourses and discussion with others. Therefore, acknowledge other’s critique and use it in a positive way.
7. Prepare yourself for leaving the nest: After your PhD, you should change the faculty, institution, state, country or even continent for a while. Also proof your scientific independence by publishing without your PhD supervisor.
8. Do not get crazy while trying to fit family plans into a scientific career: A lot of funding agencies are very family friendly despite the scientific system being the contrary.
9. Be aware that different funding regimes apply to different stages of your career.
10. Find yourself a mentor soon: This helps when you have a funding gap and can provide you with crucial information.

Common review criteria of different funding programmes despite of programme-specific processes, guidelines and criteria:

- Quality of the project
- Objectives and work programme
- Applicants’ qualifications
- Work and research environment



Grant proposal's "dos" and "don'ts":

Do:

- Respond directly to the priorities of the funder and make the connection clear (do not assume the sponsor will change the guidelines just because you have a good idea that falls outside of them).
- Follow the guidelines explicitly both in content and format.
- Positively represent your capabilities, e.g., "We have a strong academic program, but we want to reach more students" vs "We do not have any resources."
- Present evidence that (a) this issue is significant in the field (based on literature review, statistics, stakeholder opinions, etc.), and (b) your project is likely to succeed (e.g., preliminary data or pilot study).
- Make sure you have described adequate expertise on your team and physical resources to do the work.
- Make sure you have an evaluation plan for project proposals (e.g., measure outcomes in the classroom or in the community).
- Publish results of all funding.
- Write clearly, succinctly; follow an outline; and support your assertions with references or data.

Do not:

- Try to do too much in light of your experience and skills, the budget, the time allotted, your access to study participants (e.g., subjects), and your resources. Being "too ambitious" is a common rookie mistake, and is reflected in many of the comments above.
- Duplicate other funded projects.
- Resubmit a proposal without revisions in response to reviewer's comments.
- Submit a large research proposal without a publication history in the area.
- Write a budget that is either too small (skimping) or too large (padding) for the proposal work.

Remember, many of these "don'ts" can be identified by your peer reviewers before you submit.

The approach:

- Have an idea and make sure it is in your area of expertise.
- Discuss the idea carefully with people you trust.
- Check for funding opportunities for this particular idea.
- Check whether you are eligible for this funding scheme.
- Check what it is that you need to submit your proposal.
- Write the proposal.
- Submit it to a peer or mentor with experience whose opinion you value.
- Revise.
- Take time to prepare the submission with all forms, signatures... and submit!
- Wait and develop a plan b.
- If rejected, recycle (paper, different proposal, different funding scheme). If accepted, be happy!