

Aarhus University and the University of Edinburgh
Excellence in European Doctoral Education (ExEDE)

Title: The University of Edinburgh Researcher-Led Initiative Fund

What was done:

The University of Edinburgh's Researcher-Led Initiative Fund helps research students and research staff at the University take ownership of their own skills development. It has been running since 2007 and has successfully funded over forty projects across the University's three Colleges, bringing a wide variety of events and initiatives to literally hundreds of researchers.

The Researcher-Led Initiative Fund was set up by the University (initially using Roberts money) to support local training initiatives led by researchers (PhD students and research staff). The Fund is available for specific projects/activities/events initiated by research students or research staff for the benefit of groups of researchers at a School, research unit or research group level. These projects must be in keeping with the researcher development agenda of professional development and career development support for researchers.

The fund has enabled PhD students and research staff in establishing a wide range of innovative, tailored, local development opportunities. In many cases these are collaborative, building links between disciplines and between research staff and PhD students.

There are two competitive funding rounds each year and the maximum total amount available for any one submission is £3000, though many of the funded projects are for much smaller amounts. Successful applicants produce an end of project report, including an evaluation of the success and impact of the funded initiative.

Links to:

- Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors

Motivation and aims:

The aim of the Fund is to allow researchers themselves to have a greater input into the ways they are supported and developed and to complement the training and development opportunities provided through Schools and at a College or University level (e.g. through the Institute for Academic Development (IAD) and the Careers Service).

Researchers are encouraged to think more creatively and proactively about ways in which the Fund might facilitate and enhance development opportunities open to them. In addition, researchers applying to the Fund and those directly involved in the funding initiatives are fostering and building generic skills, e.g. working in a team, communication skills, project planning, project management, leadership, etc.

Fund recipients have identified the following benefits:

- promotion of student and staff interaction;
- building and engaging of research communities and networks;
- professional skills development by researchers;
- interdisciplinary work and awareness;
- potential research collaborations;
- development of ideas and projects with potential for wider public engagement.

Activities supported through the Fund to date include workshops and conferences, an Art Science Collective, several postdoctoral societies, science outreach events in local schools, and career development events. Several funded initiatives have continued beyond the project stage, some generating follow-up bids, and others finding alternative sources of funding or in-kind support.

Lessons learnt:

The Researcher-Led Initiative Fund has been a significant investment of the University's funding into researcher development, and the range of projects proposed and funded has helped broaden the impact of this funding at a local, grass roots level.

The creativity and enthusiasm of many applicants to the Fund has been inspiring. Their dedication to their own development and the development of fellow researchers, in innovative and imaginative ways has helped in developing the ownership of the wider researcher development agenda across the University. The initiatives funded so far have had a positive impact on both participants and applicants. In addition to the main outputs of each initiative, a key benefit of the scheme has been the skills developed by applicants as a result of devising, applying for, managing and reporting on the initiative. This comes through very strongly in many of the evaluation reports.

The University was short listed for the Time Higher Awards 2009 'Outstanding Support for Early Career Research Staff' for the work of the Researcher-Led Initiative Fund.

Scalability and transferability:

The model for the Researcher-Led Initiative Fund has been mirrored by several academic Schools within the University of Edinburgh and also by other UK institutions.

The operation of the fund is straightforward. A simple application form, the criteria for funding and examples of successful applications are all provided online. Applicants are able to seek advice and feedback on draft applications from fund organisers. There are two funding rounds each year, competing for an overall annual fund of £40,000. Three senior academics drawn from the University's three colleges judge the proposals and successful applicants produce an end of project report, including an evaluation of the success and impact of the funded initiative. Project reports are published online.

Further information:

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development/postgraduate/doctoral/funding/researcher-led>

Location of practice:

Institute for Academic Development (IAD), University of Edinburgh

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Work package titles and themes:

- International dimensions to examination, supervision and the doctoral experience
- Design and development of a doctoral supplement to cover broader activities, training and experiences with a particular focus on employability & mobility
- Employer engagement, including employers not traditionally associated with the recruitment of doctoral graduates
- Approaches to training and support for doctoral candidates and supervisors
- Dissemination and promotion

Note for authors:

These case studies will be made publically available via the project website and may be included in future project publications and reports (printed and online).

Project website: www.doctoralexcellence.dk

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