

From Setbacks to Success

Using Workshops to Normalise Conversations about Unfunded Research Applications

Sophie Lane | Tristan Glenn | Miranda Raven | Rachel Lewis

Overview

At the University of Reading there was a **gap in opportunities to openly discuss unsuccessful research proposals** and take **proactive next steps** i.e. mentoring, engaging with funders or repurposing unsuccessful grant applications.

A working group piloted a **workshop series** to address this. Initial feedback has been positive, and we are now rolling out these workshops across other parts of the University.

Feedback from participants

‘I found the workshop incredibly productive and encouraging. My project has just been rejected again ... but [seeing] the eventually successful journey of my ... colleague, at his fourth attempt, is giving me energy to try again.’

‘As experienced reviewers I think it’s also important to share that it’s rarely personal - although it’s very personal for those on the receiving end - and therefore one should not feel like a failure because they have had a grant (or more) rejected.’

‘What I took away is ... don’t take it personally and small pots of money ... can provide [a ...] track record in the field [making] a bigger grant more likely (and gets the research done). Mainly, I think it was good to talk about it.’

Structure

Our three pilot workshops, each working with a different discipline and different size of research group, used a 60-minute format.

	5 mins	Introduction and initial Q&A to provide context
	20 mins	Two academics from the discipline discuss experiences of reworking initially unsuccessful grant applications, covering what they learned, how they felt, and how they eventually developed ideas to achieve success.
	10 mins	Information about considerations for next steps, and how to learn from the experience and highlight lessons within Resumes for Research & Innovations (R4RI) / elsewhere. Signposting for wellbeing and mental health considerations, EDI support and current research culture activities of relevance.
	20 mins	Q&A session with discussions, queries and advice from research office and senior academics. Breakout discussions in larger workshops. Questions and signposting.

Challenges affecting academics

Unsuccessful research proposals are an almost universal part of academic life; the current funding landscape is one of increasing competitiveness, and a reduction in available funding (1, 2, 3). Yet these experiences are often hidden, underdiscussed, and can negatively impact wellbeing.

Rationale and tips

Normalising discussions around this, and having colleagues share their own experiences and how they responded to setbacks within a supportive environment, enables participants to feel a sense of solidarity with their peers, learn from others’ approaches, and understand how their setbacks can be used as powerful catalysts for growth. This destigmatises failure and positions it as a valuable part of learning.

We recommend using smaller in-person groups, encouraging follow ups and action from senior leaders to embed regular open discussions. Obtain advance buy-in from a couple of academics willing to share their experiences to prompt participation.

Next steps

We are now rolling out further workshops, and hope to see more academics engaging with funder review processes, capturing lessons learned in their Resumes for Research & Innovation and discussing how to repurpose their unsuccessful applications.

References

1 - <https://www.researchprofessional.com/news-articles/article/1416290>

2 - <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-025-02584-w>

3 - <https://www.researchprofessional.com/news-articles/article/1419337>

Contact information

- Research, Engagement & Innovation Office, University of Reading, Whiteknights, RG6 6AH
- Emails of working group members: m.raven@reading.ac.uk / r.g.lewis@reading.ac.uk / s.k.lane@reading.ac.uk / t.glenn@reading.ac.uk
- Relevant Websites: www.reading.ac.uk/research-innovation-hub/ www.reading.ac.uk/research/research-environment/research-culture

Getting Involved

We want to hear from you if you’re involved in similar initiatives within your institutions/ HEI settings:

1. What have you **learned**?
2. What **impacts** have you observed?
3. What **challenges** were faced?
4. Would you like to work **cross-institutionally** on this initiative?

