Taighde Éireann
Research Ireland

Enterprise Programmes
General Application Feedback

Potential applicants are invited to consider the general application feedback provided by our assessors in advance of submitting their applications. While taking on board this feedback will not guarantee an award, it may be useful in preventing the most common shortcomings which our assessors have identified in applications to IRC early career programmes.

I. Project

a) Clarity and coherence of the proposed research

- Proposals should be written by the applicant in collaboration with the proposed academic supervisor and enterprise mentor.
- Favour a focused project description over a lengthy one – consider short paragraphs, rather than long, continuous text: be concise and clear.
- Applications need to be calibrated depending on what stage the applicant is at: a second-year application should look very different to someone who has not started yet.
- Ensure that the proposal is accessible to reviewers less familiar with the field while maintaining sufficient detail for expert reviewers – make it very clear what the new idea or innovation is, but write as if the reader does not have any knowledge about the proposed research.
- Remember that the abstract should give an overview of the whole application, not just a promise of what is planned.
- Clearly articulate the research in terms of aims, objectives and research questions, and include hypotheses and predictions too.
- Be realistic about the aims and objectives of the project, don't be overly ambitious. Self-serving comments or hyperbole tends to alienate rather than persuade assessors: make your case without exaggeration and unrealistic goals.
- Ensure details of experimental approaches are included, with an indication of outcomes.
- Focus on strengthening the relationship between literature review, research questions and research design. Focus on rigorous methods rather than be ideologically driven.
- Fully explain and interrogate the intellectual foundations of the proposal and be aware of the importance of articulating a clear conceptual framework; it may be useful to explain not only why a particular approach is being taken, but also why other approaches are not being employed.
- Consider the reasons behind an extensive literature review – reflect on what is already known and focus on specific questions when outlining the scope of the review.
- Attention to detail is paramount. The more precise the research questions, the anticipated contributions to knowledge, the studies on which the project primarily draws, the scale of the principal elements of the research design, the expected problems in carrying out the

analysis and how they will be mitigated, and the ethical issues to be addressed, the greater the potential for a high grade. The more generic and vague these are, the less convincing of a case made.

b) Quality of the proposed research design and methodologies

- Ensure that the research design, methodology, methods and tasks are described and justified with sufficient detail – and demonstrate that you understand them. Be specific about what precisely you intend to do e.g., number of interviews, size of sample, etc.
- Methodology should be clear – avoid bullet points as well as technical terms that those outside the field will not understand. The rationale for adopting the methodology needs to be specified as do the design and techniques to be used.
- Outline your pre-existing ability to carry out the methodology or whether training will be required.
- Consider both the strengths and weaknesses/limitations of the design and offer critical reflection on the potential limitations of the chosen methodology.
- Avoid listing techniques without giving thought to how a specific experimental approach addresses a question (or its limitations).
- If applicable, make use of structures and reaction schemes in the appendices to clarify the general concept and any specifics.
- Be realistic about how many questions can really be answered when designing the project.
- Be firm and clear about the research questions (a) make sure that the background leads logically to those questions; (b) make sure that the aims and objectives are closely linked to the research questions, and make sure the research design and techniques for data collection that follow from (a) and (b) and are clearly justified.
- If the proposed research is moving towards cross-disciplinarity and/or is borrowing from another discipline, make sure to have worked out to which discipline it belongs and plan for some training in it; talk to an expert in the relevant department for advice; invite someone from that discipline as a co-supervisor at best, or at least on supervisory committee.
- If the project involves work with other cultures/languages make clear how an understanding of these differences is to be handled. If language acquisition is significant, make clear how, where and when it is to be acquired.
- Applicants with text-based projects should consider:
    - Is the chosen theoretical framework suitable for analysis of these texts and are you aware of the latest developments in debates around this body of theory as they apply to your project?
    - Do you have a defined corpus of texts and a strong rationale for using this corpus? While the corpus may evolve, it must not lack definition in the application.
    - If you are studying the work of living subjects, have you established contact and endeavoured to arrange interviews (possibly using new technologies for remote working)?

- If you are focussing tightly on the works of one intellectual figure, would your project gain from expansion and the introduction of comparative angles rather than relying on multiple contextualisation?

c) Feasibility of the proposed milestones, deliverables and contingency plans

- Spend time reflecting on the potential risks associated with the proposed research and what could be done to reduce these and always include a clear contingency plan; make sure to link the milestones, deliverables and contingency plan to the methodological approaches of each aim rather than presenting them as a list.
- "Think outside the box" when considering possible risks and suggesting how to mitigate them. Risks in research are not necessarily an undesirable outside factor – it is inherent to bona fide research, and it is therefore important to show an understanding of risks and discuss mitigating measures beyond standard or cursory remarks. Be realistic when outlining the contingency plan – a degree of 'pessimism' may help to develop a more useful plan. Reviewers want to see an understanding of what can be realistically achieved in what time frame, and the factors, both foreseeable and unforeseeable, which may hinder academic progress.
- Deliverables should bind with the dissemination plan.
- A new data set is a publishable item in itself, and should be considered (and created) as a deliverable.
- When the research involves interviews, contingency plans should focus on multiple strategies for recruitment.
- The ambition of the project should receive careful consideration. Be realistic when defining milestones and about how long both desk research (gathering material, reading, and critically understanding) and empirical research will take.
- If there are key partners in the research without whose participation the project simply cannot be delivered, ensure as far as possible that they are all signed up, or at least that there is a clear indication as to how they are to be approached – along with contingency steps if one or other of the partners declines to be involved. Projects which are dependent on such involvement cannot expect to proceed when such crucial detail is lacking, irrespective of the overall quality of the informing idea behind the project.
- The size of the project in terms of material to be analysed and the time taken to do it needs to be carefully weighed e.g. when a project involves previously unexamined archives it is better to break the material down into work packages which can be handled discretely rather than claiming a "whole nation" coverage.
- Be realistic about mastering specialist skills in a short period of time.

d) Consideration as to how the proposed research will advance state of the art and make a contribution to existing knowledge

- Take time to consider and understand the state of the art and current literature at a global level rather than simply at a local level, and briefly outline what it is.
- Identify a gap; focus on explaining why this project is timely, but use caution when asserting a topic is undeservedly neglected or the approach completely new and original.

- Avoid general or generic statements. Spend time considering how the proposed work will advance the field and contribute to new knowledge: be specific and include a clear and succinct statement about it.
- Consider how the research will impact on the field in which it is embedded, but also the implications of the work outside academia (e. g. informing debates, policy formulation); provide a preliminary indication of insights or outcomes expected from the research.
- It is worth considering societal problems as the area where research is more urgently needed. This does not need to be utilitarian; culture and well-being is a valuable area of thought and debate not least at a time of global pandemic.
- Indicate explicitly the envisaged contribution to theory building, if applicable.

e) Plans for dissemination and knowledge exchange of the proposed research

- Recognise the importance of dissemination and communication as part of the project: dissemination plans need to go beyond listing academic outputs, and, where applicable, reflect on engagement with wider (non-academic) audience: the best dissemination plans are those that meld academic publication/presentations with (where relevant) industry engagement as well as public engagement and outreach activities. Remember that research is funded by the general public, who should be informed of its importance and progress.
- Publications, even at an early career stage, can look good in the dissemination plan, but be aware that premature publications while the research is still developing can misrepresent potentially good research and cause reputational damage, and may also take much-needed time away from the actual doctoral work – careful consideration is required here.
- Be careful not to be overconfident about the ability to publish (numerous) papers in high quality journals. Reflection on the difficulty (and again, time consuming nature of) publication can be useful (and should also be reflected in contingency planning).
- Consider dissemination beyond publications in high-ranking open access journals and conferences, such as in non-academic media and publications aimed at non-academic audiences.
- Try to embed knowledge exchange at the centre of your project, rather than as an afterthought. Remember, it is supposed to be an *exchange* of knowledge. Be realistic when drafting the knowledge exchange plan, and highlight any existing experience in engaging with potential stakeholders.
- When including social media, include a clear plan of how it will be used, don't mention it just for the sake of it.
- Most impressive applications are those that explained why particular outlets would be most valuable i.e. those with a dissemination *strategy*.
- Always consider depositing new data in an archive for future re-use and consult the relevant archivist on how to prepare the data for deposit, allowing time and, if needed, funds to do so properly.

f) Consideration of the relevant ethical issues and sex/gender dimension

- Do not be dismissive about the sex/gender dimension. Spend time reflecting on the possible gender implications of the project, seek advice and guidance from your potential supervisor/mentor before asserting than none exists. It is seen as a real plus when applicants engage with the sex/gender dimension even when it is not obvious.
- If the research involves interviews/recruitment of participants, numbers of males and females should depend on the issue under investigation.
- Provide the fullest ethical consideration possible for the project and reference any appropriate ethical guidance.
- Where appropriate try and reflect on wider issues of inclusivity, and thus, for example, on the implications of their research for questions of ethnicity.
- Give a full account of the ethical implications/consent issues etc. raised by conducting interviews, demonstrate awareness of the level of training needed to conduct ethically sensitive interviews in the course of research, and a full knowledge of the level of training offered by the host institution.
- Be brief when outlining that there are no relevant ethical issues or a sex/gender dimension to the project.

II. Applicants

a) Track record and research potential of the applicant

- Clearly set out the dates of award of degree(s), including clear descriptions of subject, courses and awarding institution. If applicable, consider including class ranking in your degree description. It is not sufficient to give the name or subject matter of a degree; details of the particular courses studied and theses/dissertations written (in so far as they are relevant to the proposal and highlight the applicant's competences) should be included.
- Graduates of institutions outside of Ireland should provide as much detail as possible to explain their academic track record where grading systems differ.
- Low undergraduate grades should be addressed and explained by the applicant. It is perfectly acceptable to be on an 'upward trajectory' (i.e. academic performance increasing over time). If so, explain it and turn it into a strength.
- Include all relevant employment and research experience, but be succinct and try not to repeat the same information.
- In case of lab internships, indicate whether it was compulsory as part of your course, or voluntary.
- Avoid vague claims that cannot be substantiated; it is important to lay out your track record clearly, with unambiguous details as to achievements (and not least publications).
- Give clear evidence of your potential for research, focusing on both the breadth of your academic experience as well as other work or life experience.
- Clearly outline why you are well-matched to the proposed research in addition to how your wider experience makes you the ideal candidate for undertaking the research.

- Highlight any work submitted for publication, and if none has been submitted, identify work that could lead to a publication.
- Be careful about tunnel vision and narrowing focus on a topic already explored in detail at a previous level.

b) Personal statement

- The personal statement is not a CV, nor an autobiography; it should be understood as justifying the applicant's suitability for the research proposed (and thus the funding requested). Focus on qualities directly linked to the ability to conduct research, to the suitability to undertake the proposed research, and to how your career to date has prepared you to the project. Strive to a certain objectivity, avoid overly emotional language, and focus on the relevant facts of your career and achievements, justifying how those facts support your eligibility to conduct the given research project.
- Avoid generic and vague statements, be specific about your motivations/reasons behind the choice of subject or research environment. Avoid long narrative statements with a historic timeline that mean key achievements may get missed; additional achievements (beside degrees) should be made clearly visible to the reviewer.
- Contextualise the application. Explain how the scholarship fits with what has been achieved to date and will make a difference; clearly state if you have already started your research, how you had been funded to date and why the IRC funding is required.
- Ensure that the personal statement provides insight into your motivations to carry out this proposed research. The strongest statements contain a measure of self-reflection and personal insight and explain how the applicant came to be interested in their current project and their proposed research built upon on previous studies or offered a new departure. However, avoid overly personal links with the topic, which may suggest the risk for a lack of objectivity.
- Where possible, highlight any non-academic activities/experience that demonstrate a genuine interest in the wider research area; don't be afraid to express curiosity and fascination with research and the subject selected. Don't focus too much on the technicalities of the project but rather on the reasons behind your interest in this particular area of research.
- Personal experience through which skills and knowledge have been acquired can greatly strengthen an applicant's profile; reflect on how previous experiences have given you the broad and deep skills base that is necessary to cope with the pressures of research, prepared you for the substantial progression from taught course success to independent research. This is a huge transition that requires you to have a strong set of research-related skills in place and a coherent plan for augmenting these.
- Always include third party endorsements, for example awards (no matter how small).
- Consider setting out longer-term ambitions, describing how the award is a first step towards something bigger, but be careful about appearing overly confident.
- Make sure to address all the aspects that the guidelines stipulate.
- Give relevant information in the right place – do not include important information about the nature of the research project in the personal statement, without it also appearing in

the detailed proposal. The good organisation and articulation of the complete proposal adds to the impression that the applicant has the ability to organise a research project coherently, and that they thoroughly understand the project that they are presenting.

c) Match between applicant's profile and the proposed research project

- Take time to reflect on the match between your profile and the research project, and make it as clear as possible (e.g. education, training, previous research work) how they demonstrate your qualification to carry out the proposed research: strongest proposals do not just list achievements and experience but make clear why those achievements and experience are relevant for the proposed project and how they make the applicant an especially suitable candidate for undertaking the proposed project; e.g. if you have completed a research project, show what skills you gained from it which will help carry out the proposed research.
- However, be careful about overstating the closeness between your profile and the proposed research, as questions and doubts may arise about narrowness of perspective and the risk of tunnel vision: has the candidate ever known or cared about anything else or acquired or shown interest in acquiring any realistic sense of broader contexts and significances?
- If the work is related to previous research with the proposed supervisor or ongoing academic employment, highlight how you have identified innovative questions independently, rather than as part of a team.
- The more the research project is clearly the development of a research trajectory and long-standing commitment the better. If there is no obvious link between previous experience and qualifications and the intended project – make the case.
- While applicants will acquire additional skills and competences during the research, it may appear problematic if the research proposed requires the applicant to acquire radically new knowledges or competences, without any previous experience, or lacks a sound familiarity with the theory that underpins the research. Lack of relevant experience may weaken the application, even if training is available in the host institution.

III. Training and career development

a) Clarity and quality of training and career development plan

- Don’t be generic and vague, be specific and detailed in both the acquisition of scientific skills and soft/transferable skills. Avoid generic statements from the host institution and enterprise/employment partner on training and career development opportunities, or else adapt it to demonstrate how those opportunities would specifically benefit you.
- Fully engage with the guidelines provided, especially with regards to the specific opportunities that you will seek to develop the skills.
- Consider integrating some of the information provided in the ‘Specialist Knowledge’ section of the application form into the Training and Career Plan; show evidence of how the plan will emerge from/map onto the project (e.g. timing of training needed to perform specific parts of the research).

- Justify collaborations in terms of how they will affect the project, what you will get from them, and how they will impact on your future plans.
- The best applicants are able to link their academic interests to broader social issues and also give thought to the relationship between academia and the wider cultural sphere: are you connecting your project to forms of meaningful social engagement? What is the social and cultural urgency of you project? Why do we need it? Consider whether you are using the training opportunities to extend your abilities for social engagement and for developing influential research impacts.

b) Capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills

- Applicants should ensure that they have engaged in genuine reflection and audited their existing skills – don't be afraid to acknowledge gaps for which training is needed. The best plans are those that show an understanding of the applicant's skills gaps and how they will be filled.
- Discuss both the skills already acquired and the new skills/ training that will be gained or are needed, and link them; demonstrate how the scholarship would transform the existing skills in those identified as being required to pursue the chosen career.
- Give clear details about any courses already taken, especially those taken independently of previous degree courses. Be specific about which training courses you plan to undertake and be realistic about the number of courses you can complete.
- Consider wider skills sets beyond the practical aspects of research work, including management, administrative, leadership and teaching skills. Try to think imaginatively about skills you would like to acquire in order to differentiate your plan from those of all of the other applicants.
- Be realistic with regards to how many skills can be acquired during the time of the scholarship, and about the capacity for skill-acquisition (e.g. language skills) in a relatively short time; it is important to reflect upon the total time available for research and the time that training will occupy within that total - it should not be done to the detriment of the actual research.
- Applicants need to demonstrate their capacity to acquire new skills by providing evidence of a track record of acquiring skills. Demonstrating they have successfully undertaken a range of training opportunities (and the ability to search out such opportunities) inevitably shows that applicants have the capacity to acquire new knowledge and skills.
- Have a clear idea not just of training and development needs, but of how these could be met at the proposed enterprise/employment partner and host institution.

c) Potential for the development of skills relevant to employment outside the traditional academic sector

- Do not focus only on the academic job market. Be realistic about the prospect of finding long-term academic employment and give serious and realistic consideration to career paths outside academia, in the industry sector.

- Try and describe your thoughts about different career paths, and how they are likely to stimulate a researcher's personal intellectual development and bring innovation into the academic environment.
- Give thought to and identify the transferable skills (and indeed knowledge) that you will acquire during your research, and how it might facilitate your future employment.
- Demonstrate how the research proposal would facilitate a non-academic career.

d) Clarity of thought as to how the scholarship would impact on the applicant's career path

- Consider the contribution of the scholarship as prestigious and beneficial with regards to networking and access to resources and people.
- Where the career path is envisioned within academia, consider how this can be achieved in addition to networking, conferences and publication, e.g. where your research project might take you in terms of demand for expertise, growth areas, global demand (or lack thereof).
- Outline what specifically about the scholarship will enable you to pursue your career goals. Link the opportunities this gives directly to the skills to be gained and how these skills are required for the chosen career. These do not necessarily need to be academic/technical skills picked up by a training program: think outside the box to make the application stand out.
- The more the applicant can place the project within the context of their previous studies and experiences and can think through the various avenues where it might lead, the more convincing the narrative.
- The best applications are imaginative and insightful and those that have given serious consideration to the non-academic pathways that the award might potentially open up.
- Applicants needs to demonstrate that the jobs that they aspire to (e.g. work in charities, think tanks, or other forms of (research orientated) public engagement) actually exist (and do not represent careers that are harder to enter than academia).

IV. Environment

a) Suitability and ability of the proposed academic supervisor(s) and enterprise mentor to provide adequate supervision

- Applicant, enterprise mentor and academic supervisor should already be in close contact ahead of submitting the application, in order to comprehensively discuss the proposed research. The enterprise partner and academic supervisor must be clearly on-board and should write their sections in a bespoke manner.
- The academic supervisor should demonstrate appropriate research expertise in the proposed research, and that they can provide a supportive environment.
- The academic supervisor should consider including detailed information about their track record (e.g. number of years after PhD, number of current and past research students).

- If the primary supervisor lacks experience or has not had any successful PhD students to date, consider a more senior colleague as a co-supervisor – their track record also included. It is also worth explicitly acknowledging this and making a positive case as to why they are still the best researcher for the job.
- Enterprise mentors should provide details of relevant company/organisational work in the research area proposed.
- Enterprise mentors should provide details of how the applicant will benefit from working with their company/organisation and the training and career development opportunities that will be afforded to the applicant.
- Consider mentioning the position of the research team in the international context, if applicable.

b) Quality of infrastructure, facilities and support to be provided by the higher education institution and enterprise partner.

- Avoid generalities, and avoid using an institutional template. Include a personal justification explaining why the facilities and infrastructure are appropriate and will support you and the ability to carry out the proposed research. An attempt to link your project to the institution's environment makes an application stand out. The more vague the connection, the less convincing it appears to be.
- Outline what is distinct about the chosen host environment, such as industry placement, inter-lab exchange; how it has the best resources for the specified work (e.g. equipment, access to datasets), stressing any specific resources and/or opportunities that distinguish it from others; the possibility for public engagement, conferences and other outreach activities should also be highlighted. Specific detail is important here.
- Demonstrate a strong knowledge of the enterprise partner and host institution. Ask about the research culture.
- Highlight the enterprise partner's training programme.
- Ensure the host institution has a broad series of support structures for administrative, pastoral and academic support as well as evidence of a strong research culture in the fields of the proposal.
- In case of very specialised projects the existence of specialised equipment or access to necessary computer power must be included.

c) Match between the applicant, academic supervisor(s), enterprise mentor, higher education institution and enterprise partner.

- When choosing an academic supervisor and host institution, the applicant should look at what the prospective supervisor's PhD students have gone to achieve, and at how well the prospective host institution's facilities and infrastructures fit with the proposed research.

- Make sure to discuss this aspect of the application with your proposed academic supervisor(s) and enterprise partner. Generic statements that make little reference to the applicant or the project in question should be avoided. The best applications are those that can justify that the research would not happen if it did not happen at the chosen institution and enterprise partner, with the chosen supervisor and mentor,

because of the uniquely distinctive research of the academic supervisor and industry knowledge of the enterprise mentor.
• Consider giving some insight into the interaction between the scholar, academic supervisor and enterprise mentor that has led to developing the project, how much discussion has taken place etc.
• Endeavour to demonstrate the match between the applicant's background, the academic supervisor's expertise and the enterprise partner's business or operational needs.
• Highlight the connections of the proposed research to the expertise of the academic supervisor and the work of the enterprise partner.
• Applicants should emphasise the capacity of the institution to understand the student's specific needs and to respond to them in appropriate ways.
• Be honest about the reasons for choosing the institution and enterprise partner.
• If already registered in the host institution, reflect on the experience of working there, even for a short period.