

**Part of a series of case studies showcasing the value of EPSRC's engagement with stakeholders in achieving positive outcomes.**

## **A deeper talent pool**

*Responding to community feedback means that EPSRC now provides more tailored support that meets the requirements of researchers in the early stages of their careers.*

- Direct engagement with early-career researchers highlighted some limitations of the previous First Grants scheme
- EPSRC acted on feedback, carrying out a review of First Grants
- Following extensive consultation, First Grants became New Investigator Awards, with significant changes to eligibility criteria alongside the removal of the funding cap
- EPSRC support for early-career researchers now allows for more ambitious proposals, and enables the UK to draw on a deeper pool of research talent.

EPSRC's First Grants scheme was a funding mechanism which supported researchers in the early stages of their careers. By ensuring direct contact with these early career researchers, EPSRC was able to hear feedback on its First Grants scheme, which supported academics who had not previously applied to EPSRC as a Principal Investigator on research projects.

Responding to this feedback, EPSRC carried out a lengthy process of review and consultation, which resulted in First Grants evolving into New Investigator Awards. These Awards have much more flexible parameters around the amount of funding that can be applied for, and are no longer affected by the amount of time that researchers may have taken in reaching this particular stage in their careers.

Early evidence suggests that the new scheme has encouraged an increase in the ambition and quality of some projects, as well as a broadening of the range of early career researchers who now qualify for support.

### **Find out more**

For EPSRC's Head of University Relationships, Maisie England, this story is 'a good illustration of the different levels of contact that EPSRC has with universities,' and one that shows EPSRC's responsiveness in acting on the feedback it gets. 'We were hearing similar things during our telephone calls and visits with senior university staff, with departments, and with individual academics: that, while it provided support for people and funded

excellent research, some aspects of the First Grants scheme were not as flexible as they could be.'

Crucially, this was also what was coming from EPSRC's direct contacts with the community that was most affected by First Grants: early career researchers themselves. James Dracott, currently Programme Lead for UKRI Future Leader Fellowships, led the activity during his time at EPSRC and recalls: 'the fact that there were perceived limitations with First Grants was clear from conversations we had whenever we went out and visited universities. We realised we were having the same conversations with individuals specifically at the early career level, which is where most of the complaints were coming from.'

Research projects funded through the First Grants scheme had a £125,000 cap, and a two-year duration. Applications had to be made within three years of a researcher gaining a permanent academic post, and within ten years of their gaining a PhD. As Senior Portfolio Manager, Melanie Buckley, explains, 'EPSRC's portfolio managers had said, for example, that when researchers were coming up to the point where they would no longer be eligible, they were sometimes putting in rushed applications before they were ready.' Early career researchers made it clear that they felt that removing funding and duration caps would encourage higher quality and more ambitious projects.

In 2013 EPSRC set up a workstream which looked at what made a successful early career researcher: as part of this process, universities and industrial mentors were consulted, over 1,200 early career researchers responded to an online survey, and a working group (which included early careers researchers) was set up to consider the evidence that was gathered. A key recommendation that arose from this workstream was to review the First Grants scheme. This took place through 2015: what had begun as informal face-to-face conversations became a structured process of review, consultation and trial, carried out by EPSRC's Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and People team and involving many different universities, to look at how the First Grants scheme could be improved.

As James Dracott makes clear, this involved listening to sometimes contradictory advice, from different parts of the research community. 'I regularly met with the quantum physics community, and heard time after time, at various universities, about the constraints of the funding cap. Quantum physics needs big bits of costly equipment, but mathematicians and theoretical physicists were concerned that changes might result in fewer, larger grants being awarded. So we put together a matrix of the views of different communities, trying to work out where the compromise was. We wanted to make the new scheme as open as possible. We took off the funding caps, but required funding figures to be justified. Unreasonably large amounts would be rejected during the review stage. We wanted to see more training included. We also wanted the eligibility criteria to be much more open.'

The New Investigator Awards, which were introduced in July 2017, removed the caps on financial value and project duration, put a greater emphasis on the provision of university support in career development, and removed the time-based eligibility criteria.

An example of the kind of project that can now be supported through the New Investigator Awards, is that proposed by chemical engineer Marloes Peeters, who is now a senior lecturer at Newcastle University, and who was one of the first recipients of the Awards. The project, which was awarded a grant of £205,241, involves the development of sensors to identify bacterial infection in hospitals and other locations. As Marloes Peeters told *Research Fortnight*, ‘the lifting of the £100,000 funding cap made [the New Investigator Awards] really attractive.’ Indeed, ‘we waited to submit the application until that change happened, because having the extra budget makes a big difference.’

The new scheme has been closely monitored by EPSRC, to help continue the process of improvement. In July 2018 an initial review suggested that more emphasis needed to be given to career development being an integral part of the Awards: as a result, additional guidance was drafted and circulated for comment during EPSRC’s quarterly engagements with key universities in late 2018, with a finalised document being published in April 2019.

‘We’re not saying everything is perfect now,’ says Maisie England; ‘this is an on-going process of listening to stakeholders, and considering further changes.’