

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

Getting the details right

With close co-operation and open dialogue with EPSRC, university Research Offices play a vital role within the research landscape.

- Engaging with university Research Offices leads ultimately to better articulated and more considered research proposals
- The annual Research Office Workshops allow EPSRC to communicate its priorities and test new policies, as well as receive feedback
- Research Offices value the opportunity to share good practice.

Producing world-class research takes an entire ecosystem, of which the researchers themselves are only one part. The Research Offices in the UK's universities may not be the ones who make the headlines, but they also play a vital role, connecting up the research teams in their institutions with the sources of funding (including EPSRC) that can support their research. That makes them crucial to EPSRC's work, and explains why EPSRC values so highly its relationship with the Research Offices.

While they go by slightly different titles – they can be Research Operations Offices, Research Support Offices, or Research Services Offices for example – the Research Offices in UK universities gather intelligence on the funding opportunities that are available, match academics within their institutions with those opportunities, and then work with these academics to put together high-quality funding applications (helping to build research partnerships, for example).

This is an area where open communication is vital. From a research funder's perspective, being able to talk to the Research Offices about what is needed in applications, what funding calls are intended to achieve, and what they are planning, all results in better applications and, ultimately, more considered research being supported. For their part, it is helpful for Research Offices to be able to make funders know when there are difficulties with certain processes or procedures, for example. The Research Offices also have much that they can learn from each other, as they face common challenges.

To help with all this, the annual Research Office Workshops that EPSRC organises provide a platform for addressing ongoing issues. They are a forum for two-way communication,

valuable for providing news, for clarifying points where there might be confusion, and for gathering input and feedback.

Find out more

For Shari Bull, who is a Research Development Advisor at Heriot-Watt University, the value of the Research Office Workshops lies partly in the fact that they are indeed workshops, where members of Research Offices in various universities can meet face-to-face with EPSRC. 'It's a two-way thing, with EPSRC giving out information to us but also gathering information from the different universities. They look for feedback on what's going well, as well as what isn't. They also tell us about the different funding streams, and give us information about what's coming up.'

This exchange of ideas ultimately results in clearer guidance, the development of tools and resources, and improved and easier-to-use processes. This in turn helps both those universities that attend the Research Office workshops, and those that do not (it would be unfeasible for all of the 90 or so Higher Education institutions that receive EPSRC funding to attend the Workshops, so EPSRC invites representatives from the 36 universities which deal most regularly with EPSRC and receive most of its support, and so are best placed to suggest improvements).

As Shari Bull points out, 'there are many different kinds of contact between universities and EPSRC. But the Research Office Workshops are specifically a Research-Office-to-Research-Office interaction. Everyone at the workshops is there from the research support side: they're not researchers. It means we can really get into the detail of research support issues: we're concentrating on research support rather than the research itself.'

From EPSRC's point of view, the Research Office Workshops are valuable in a number of ways. Susan Soulsby, Senior Policy Manager at EPSRC, explains: 'the workshops allow us to update Research Offices on developments in our strategy and funding policy. We have an opportunity to go into more detail and discuss specific activities, to build understanding and further explore the impact of our policies.'

'We want to fund the best people to do the best research: that's at the heart of what we do. Many of our events are much more focused on the science and research so it is important that we have a suite of engagement opportunities, to ensure all of our key stakeholders are engaged and to look at the other drivers and challenges in the sector. We really value what the Research Offices have to say, and we take that on board when we develop our strategy and our operations. It all helps us to better understand the challenges they face and work in partnership to address them.'

Finally for Maisie England, EPSRC's Head of University Partnerships, the Research Office Workshops are one of a number of a range of ways of engaging with universities. 'Some of our other ways of talking to universities involve bilateral conversations with individual universities and key grant holders. But these are conversations in the round: we can get everyone together to talk about policy changes, say. We can use them to test ideas, such as how we might work closer with industry. It opens up a dialogue. It helps us understand important concerns, and it is a forum for us to test new policy thinking.'

Feedback from the workshops has already resulted in EPSRC making changes to make things easier for the Research Offices: from providing checklists and extra guidance to creating a new Funding Options Flowchart on the EPSRC website to help guide applicants to the right funding stream for them. 'Some of these things might seem like small procedural changes,' says Maisie England, 'but making the process just a little bit more efficient adds up to better applications, and better research ultimately being funded.'