From acorns to … oaks: Getting started in Higher Education research

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Report

This short reflective piece recounts the experience of two academics as they began their journey into the world of higher education research. It outlines the steps taken to progress from small-scale, institutional research funding to winning a grant from a highly competitive national fund. Some of the key learning and advice for others wishing to follow a similar path is shared.

It is no secret that applying for research funding is difficult, time-consuming, highly competitive and stressful for academics (e.g., Herbert et al., 2014). Within the field of Higher Education research, funding for those trying to get started is relatively scarce. The big players in the field (i.e. The Office for Students/Advance HE) support large-scale, high-impact projects, but the calls for these tend to be infrequent and have very short timeframes for application when they do come. The small number of regular opportunities for sometimes smaller pots (i.e. SEDA grants) are enormously competitive and there are relatively few small-scale funding calls that enable those stepping into the field of Higher Education research for the first time to get started. Many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have recognised this challenge and have instigated internal funding schemes that staff can bid for through a competitive process of application. The University of Lincoln is no exception. When the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) was established, so too was an annual award scheme that offered researchers £750 to carry out initial or exploratory research into a particular area of interest. By doing so, this fund provided researchers with a way to build an evidence base and establish a track record of delivering on plan which would enable put them in a stronger position to go onto apply for larger grants. What follows is our story of doing just that.

In December 2017, as the authors here, we met at a University-run Mental Health First Aid course. We quickly established that we both had an interest in postgraduate research student (PGR) mental health, which stemmed from our own experiences and struggles during our PhD studies, and a desire to try and improve the student experience for others. Despite the fact that we had graduated 10 years apart, the situation between 2007 and 2017 seemed to have changed very little. PhD students were still feeling isolated, unsupported and under-valued, all of which was continuing to take its toll on their psychological wellbeing (Phyalto et al., 2012; Levecque et al., 2017; Barry et al., 2018; Metcalfe et al., 2018). Through our discussions and scoping of the existing literature in the following months, we became aware of work that was already taking place across the sector to try to develop interventions to help students 'cope' with their studies or build resilience to the challenges. Our view, however, was that there was a need to develop a more complete understanding of the PhD student experience. Drawing together our research backgrounds in public health and positive psychology, we wanted to explore the experience of PhD students in depth and find out what we could do to try and prevent problems from occurring in the first place. The call for the LHERI research awards coincided with us deciding what our research focus was going to be. Our aim was to produce a piece of work that was of the best possible quality and that would give us evidence on which we could build an application for further funding. This fitted really well with what LHERI was looking for. Our application was submitted in October 2018.

Between March 2019 and August 2019, we ran the research project as a small-scale, qualitative study with nine recent PHD graduates using an innovative life grid methodology to explore how psychological wellbeing changed across the course of the PhD journey. Part way through our project, we had an abstract accepted for the first international conference on PGR student mental health and wellbeing organised by the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE). We were both lucky to be able to secure financial support to attend the conference, which turned out to be a significant turning point for us. The presentation that we delivered attracted a large audience and lots of interest from others working in the area, including some of the most prominent authors in the field. We realised that there was very little research of the nature that we were undertaking elsewhere in the sector and that we were generating significant new evidence. This gave us new confidence in our work. On the back of the conference presentation we were able to establish connections with three other UK HEIs and wrote two blogs that were featured on the UKCGE and Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN) websites.

As we analysed the research data, we began to identify a number of further research ideas. We captured these and began to build them into potentially new projects, whilst all the time keeping watch for additional funding options. We explored a number of these, but none fitted particularly well. Through our networks, we had heard that SMaRteN was due to put out a call for projects looking at non-clinical interventions to improve student mental health in the autumn of 2019, so we selected one of our ideas that matched best with this and started to refine it. We reached out to the contacts we had made through the UKCGE conference to ask them to collaborate with us and used the evidence our previous research had generated to justify what we wanted to do. The application was submitted in March 2020 and we found out that we had been successfully awarded the funding in May 2020. The project commences in November 2020 and is the first of three planned phases of research. Phases two and three will require additional, larger-scale funding, but we hope that if we can prove the value of our idea and continue to generate quality research within budget and on time that we will be in a great position to apply for this when the time comes.

There is no easy way to get started in Higher Education research. Getting to where we are now has taken us two years and a lot of hard work. The funding that we have managed to secure is small in comparison to what is generated in some subject areas, but we are incredibly proud of what we have achieved so far. We have learnt a lot on this journey, and although our insights are probably not revolutionary, we hope that they might inspire anyone who is wondering about whether to dip their toe in to the higher education research waters to give it a go.

Our top tips and key learning points:

- Don’t be afraid to start small and build as you go. You can do a lot with a small amount of money if you think carefully about how to use it. For example, with the £750 we had from LHERI we couldn’t buy out our time for research, but we could buy in the services of others to help do some of the more time intensive tasks. Finding someone who could transcribe for us was the best investment of our money. Many people don’t take advantage of institutional schemes because they feel that the money available is not enough, you just have to be creative! High quality research is definitely possible on a budget. Our first article is currently under review with an international, peer-reviewed higher education journal.
- Network. Yes, we know that everyone says this, but it really does help. Neither of us like it, and we both find it anxiety-provoking, so our approach was to make sure that we had something important to say before we put ourselves on the stage. By doing so, when people approached us to talk about the work we were doing, we felt confident to engage in conversation and those conversations have proved really valuable.
- Find the funding opportunity that fits with your idea, rather than trying to fit your research idea to the funding that is being offered. It may mean that you have wait for the right source of funding to appear, but it makes the process of

application much less stressful if you don't have to fit a proverbial square peg into a round hole.

- Build your own evidence base and stick with what you know. One of the best decisions that we made was not to follow what everyone else in the field was doing (i.e. look for an intervention to solve the problem) but to go right back to the basics and ask fundamental questions like 'Why does the mental health of PGRs suffer during their studies?' We approached our research using methods borrowed from our subject areas (life grid methods were originally used in epidemiological research) and using concepts we understood well (i.e. psychological wellbeing) which gave us a solid foundation from which to explore a new area. We realised that the evidence we needed to build a bigger application for funding did not exist, so we set about creating it ourselves as our first project.
- Write your next research application into your current one. When we applied for the LHERI fund we were very clear that we wanted the funding to help build towards an application for a bigger research grant, and we have done the same this time too. This has helped to keep us focused. If another research application is one of your project objectives, it helps to drive you towards this goal.
- Work with someone who drives you on. We are lucky that a chance encounter has led to such a productive research partnership, although unfortunately we can't tell you how to engineer that! However, what we can say is that sometimes the best partnerships come where you would least expect them. We share a core passion (for the subject, and to produce high-quality, impactful research) but we work in very different ways. We have different skills and levels of experience, but that has worked to our advantage, and we have become great friends along the way too.

You can build a strong platform for big things with a small amount of money, so don't be afraid to give it a go!

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